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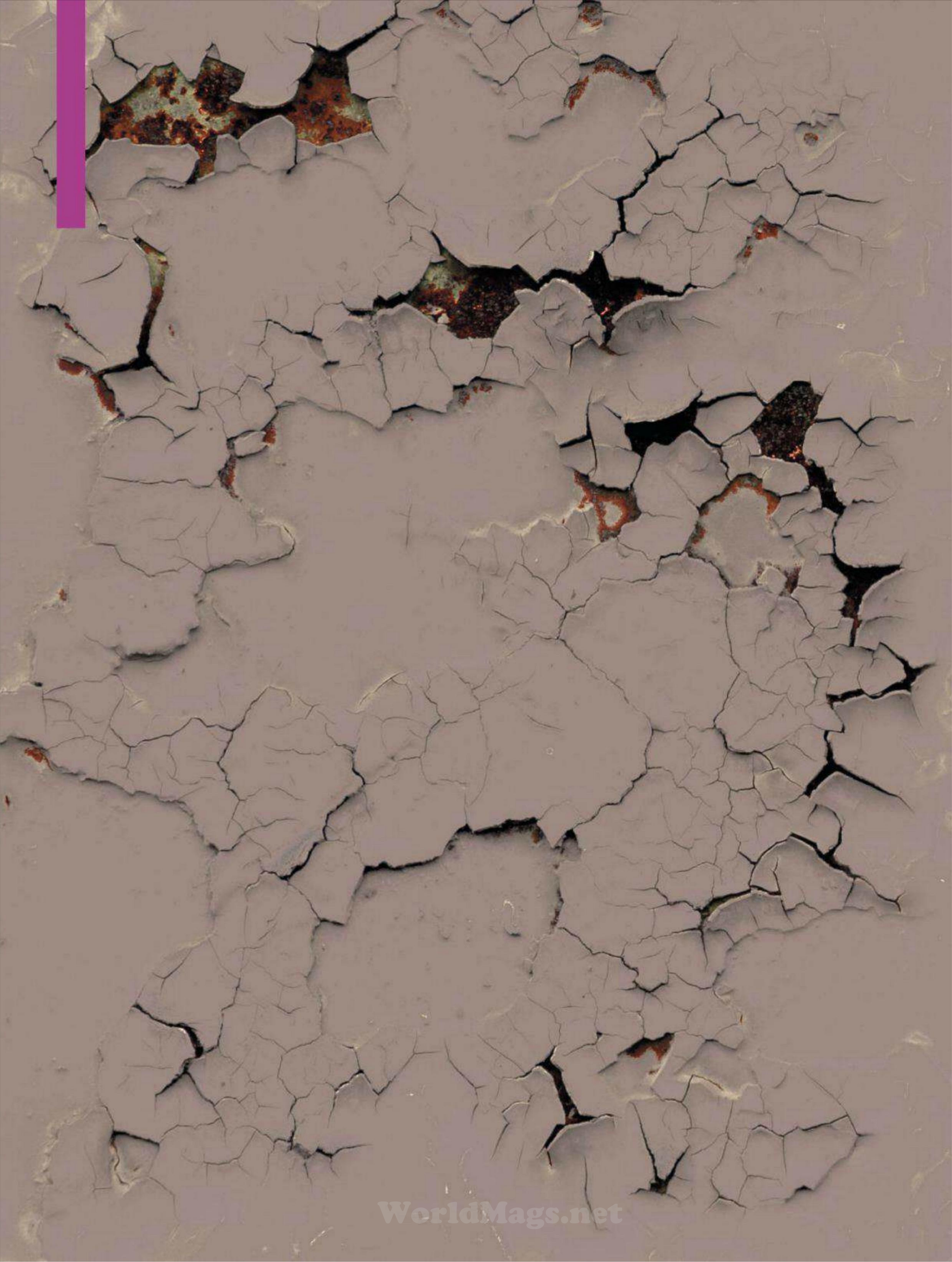
Salvador stars in a sequel that builds on the trashy charms of *Borderlands*, refining Gearbox's fusion of FPS and RPG. On p42 the game's creators outline an outlandish, bullet-strewn return to Pandora's wastes

HEAVY METAL

GEARBOX FIRES UP ANOTHER GAZILLION (OR SO) GUNS WITH **BORDERLANDS 2**

REVIEWS
MASS EFFECT 3
BINARY DOMAIN
ASURA'S WRATH
KID ICARUS: UPRISING
SYNDICATE
JOURNEY

#239
APRIL 2012



When nearly 20 million guns simply aren't enough



Numbers have been important to videogames since their early days, from the 2,048 planets cast across the eight explorable galaxies of 1984's *Elite* to the 10,000 levels of 1986's *The Sentinel*. Big digits suggest a generous helping of content for your money, which is why they're so irresistible to marketing departments in search of back-of-box bullet points. Few games, though, take numbers to the excesses of *Borderlands*, whose arsenal boasts over 17,750,000 different weapon configurations. Figures like these make you think, well, wouldn't 16,750,000 different weapon configurations have been plenty? But that wouldn't be developer Gearbox's way. Its *Borderlands* sequel was recently given a release date to the accompaniment of a trailer whose opening words – 'GET READY TO JOY PUKE YOUR FACE OFF' – underlined the fact that the Texas studio isn't staffed by delicate flowers out to redefine emotional resonance within the context of a videogame. Instead, *Borderlands 2* is a full-bore shotgun blast to the arse – with a grenade or two lobbed in for good measure. And with even more than 17,750,000 weapons this time around, too.

And yet in many ways it's also a more measured prospect than the 2009 original. From deeper narrative content to carefully refined combat, its development team has been working on smoothing off some of the first game's rougher edges, as detailed in our story beginning on p42.

Large numbers also feed into the new book from Masters Of Doom author David Kushner. Concerned with one of the biggest-selling game properties of all time, Jacked: The Unauthorised Behind-The-Scenes Story Of Grand Theft Auto, published this month, digs deep into Rockstar's series, as you'll appreciate from this issue's exclusive extract on p86.

This issue also sees the appearance of the first in a series of articles focused on the psychology of videogaming, beginning with the free-to-play scene. As the biggest growth area in games, the numbers are astonishing here, too. Read about the behaviours driving the phenomenon on p78.



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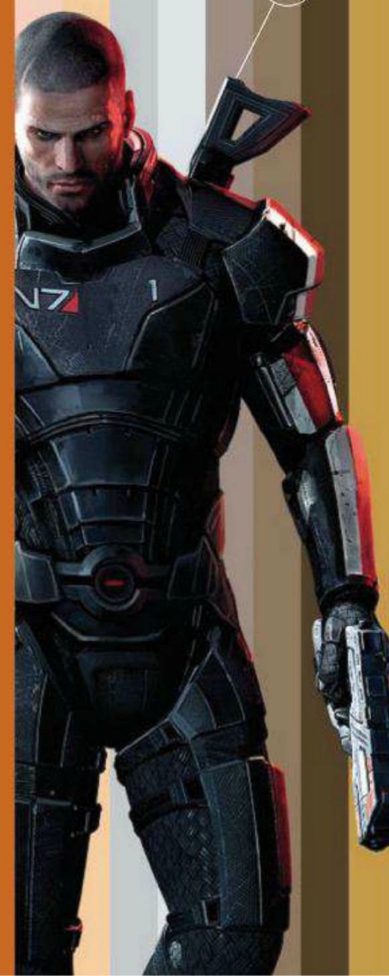
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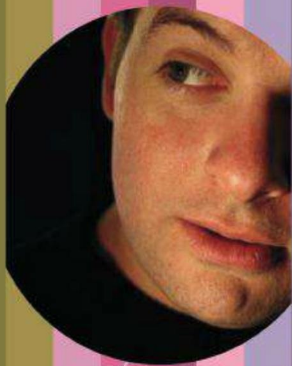
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Super Mario 64 123



92

132

#239

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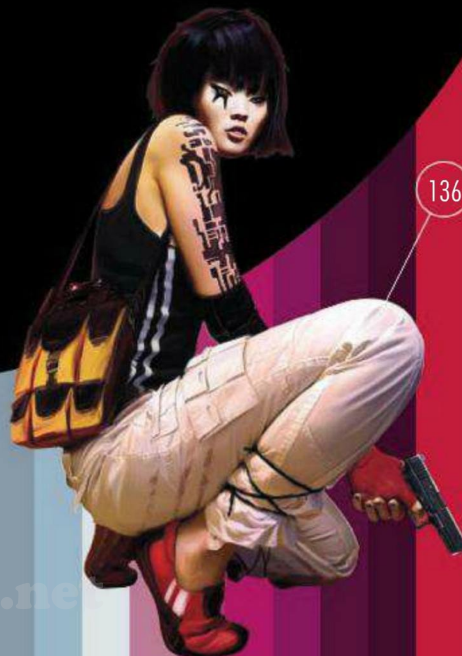
APRIL 2012

42





136



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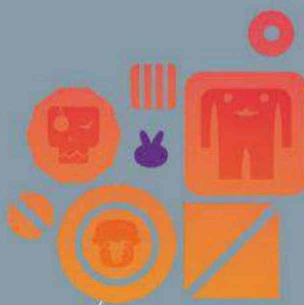


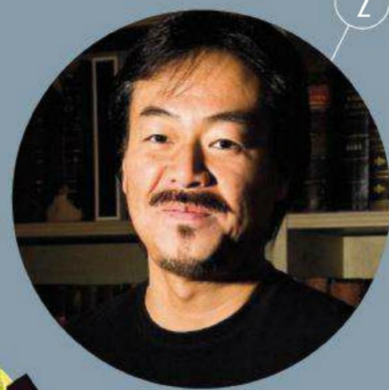
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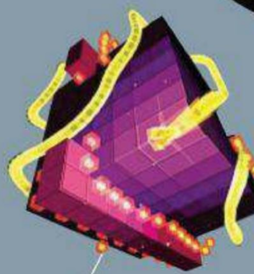
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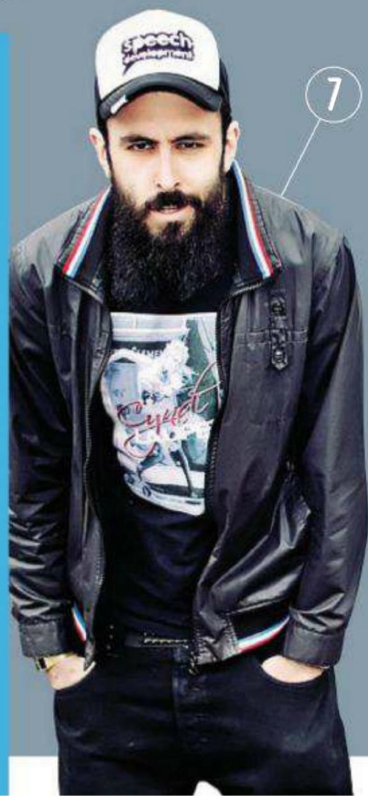

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5


2


3


6



7


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VLEDGE

Double Fine's Kickstarter success has been massive, but does that mean an easy ride for other gaming projects? On p10, we look to the minds behind crowd-funded games such as *Project CARS* (1) for answers. Tapping the brain of *Final Fantasy* legend Hironobu Sakaguchi (2) on p14 also proves fruitful, as he fills us in on the rationale and processes behind his triumphant return to the director's chair to make *The Last Story*. Talking of returns, on p16 it's time to meet *Qrth-Phyl* (3), Matt James of Hermitgames' procedural reimagining of *Blockade* in glowing 3D. Someone who's been around the block a bit is Ben Cousins (4), the general manager of Ngmoco's new Sweden studio. Ahead of his keynote speech at the inaugural freemium-focused F2P Summit in London, on p18 he talks about the state of the industry as it transitions even further towards free-to-play dominance. But it was graphic design that looked ready to change gaming back when *Wipeout* was released, and only recently have its artists finished work on their second-ever game series: *Lumines* (5). We see the results and learn the tale behind them on p20. Elsewhere, Sony CEO Kaz Hirai, Epic's Tim Sweeney and Markus 'Notch' Persson (6) share their views via Soundbytes on p22, while hip-hop artist Scroobius Pip (7) waxes lyrical about his biggest gaming addiction and the joys of Mario on p26.



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Up-to-the-minute game news and views

A fine turn-up for the books

Is Double Fine's adventure game a blessing or a curse for funding outfit Kickstarter?



Tim Schafer and co have attracted several times the asking price for their project, but has Double Fine's success kickstarted a revolution in the way games will be funded in the future?





Ian Bell, MD of Slightly Mad Studios, and Megan Carriker, marketing director of Spark Plug Studios

CROWD SURGE
Well, if Tim Schafer can do it, why not Obsidian? There are several reasons, but that hasn't stopped the *Fallout: New Vegas* dev joining a growing list of prospectors in gaming's latest gold rush. "The idea of player-supported funding is... Well, it's proof certain genres aren't dead and sequels may have more legs than they seem," said designer Chris Avellone in a blog post. "And the idea of not having to argue that with a publisher is appealing. Out of curiosity, if Obsidian did Kickstart a project, what would you want to see funded?" David Jaffe, in his inimitable way, was more cautious: "There's kind of the fear that this would suddenly become, you know, a dick-measuring contest. Schafer comes out and raises a million, and Jaffe only raises $200,000." But he also said: "I definitely think it's a really cool thing, so I'd consider it."

Double Fine's success in raising over $2.2million (at the time of going to press) for a planned point-and-click adventure hasn't just thrown Kickstarter into the limelight like never before, it has also threatened to make the site synonymous with the concept of 'crowd-funding'. (Effectively, getting people to buy into a game at the pre-alpha stage, if not even earlier.) And it has a lot of people wondering what, if anything, this means for developers who aren't lionised products of the establishment.

Spark Plug Games is just such a studio. With a portfolio that includes *Pac-Match Party* for iOS, and the beautifully illustrated adventure *Lost In Time: The Clockwork Tower* for PC, Mac and iPad, it's been a Kickstarter hopeful since before the media frenzy began. But its own Kickstarter project, *Steampunk Bullet Train*, has not made $2.2million-plus. In fact, when we talk, the studio has made $941, with 16 days remaining to hit its minimum goal of $25,000.

"We aren't at 30 per cent yet – 90 per cent of Kickstarter projects that reach 30 per cent are successful, in general – but we've been absolutely thrilled with the attention and support we've received," insists marketing director **Megan Carriker**. "On our first day, Kickstarter listed us as a Staff Pick. No matter what, it's a success. If we get funding, that's fantastic – of course we want that to happen. But if not, we live and learn."

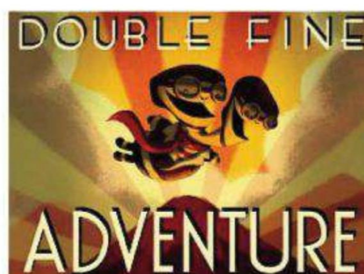
Like others, Carriker's not convinced that the Tim Schafer scenario is one that applies to many, if any, of his less illustrious peers. "Nobody's going to recreate the magical combination. [Double Fine] have a beautiful mix of nostalgia, brand recognition, serious cult following... and the timing was perfect. They're the perfect underdog that used the perfect underdog venue."

Nevertheless, she believes that "people who feel resentment towards Double Fine's success suck. There will always be those crappy people out there, though. C'est la vie."

Despite her optimism, she has concerns for what happens now. "My biggest fear in regards to this being a 'win' for everyone else is that now other big developers will jump on board with riskier projects, and older IP coming back from the grave. And that's not what Kickstarter is about – it's about helping passionate projects receive enough funding to get going.



Profile goes a long way when it comes to funding. The team at Spark Plug Games (above) doesn't have Double Fine's cachet, and its own Kickstarter project, *Steampunk Bullet Train* (below), has struggled to date





"Like Schafer said [in his promotional video for *Double Fine Adventure*], game development is very, very costly. Our request of $25,000 is a drop in the bucket [given] how much games typically cost. Same for Double Fine: $400,000 is a just a fraction of the cost [when] compared to the millions it takes for big-title games to be developed these days."

Carriker's fears about the future of Kickstarter are shared by a game industry player with a much older commitment to the crowd-funding model than Schafer and his fledgling point-and-click. **Ian Bell** is the MD of Slightly Mad Studios, the maker of the *Need For Speed: Shift* games, which has since embarked on making the handsome *Project CARS*. Its game was playable from the moment it became crowd funded, and its gamer backers get a lot of involvement for their investment capital.

"We're not just offering: here's your face in the game, a logo, an advert... Well, we are but that's not all," Bell says. "The big story is that 36,000 people are now actively involved in building the game with us. They're choosing which cars they want, which tracks, which shipping method we should go for. The fact we've recently changed from free-to-play on PC to a full boxed product is because of what we call 'the team', the guys who've paid their money. It's a huge level of involvement, and they're doing the work that the publisher would normally do. They're paying us, they're doing the QA – at least on PC – and they provide us with some viral marketing.

"So our system is much more involved and a better system. But it's not something you could do generically for a Kickstarter system, because we have to work very hard to make sure it's logistically possible. But I don't want to make that a negative



Slightly Mad's *Project CARS* offers a lot of creative control to its host of backers. An example of their power is that the end result of the dev team's labours will now be a boxed product, rather than a solely digital one

[about Kickstarter]. I think it's fantastic that individuals at home trust the industry so much that they'll come and put some of their hard-earned cash in to help us develop things. And I think it also says that there's something very bloody wrong in the current developer/ publisher relationship."

> "My biggest fear in regards to this being a 'win' is that now other big developers will jump on board"

Bell's endorsement of Double Fine's success perhaps reflects his love of *The Secret Of Monkey Island* – "I must have played it ten times" – but his longterm forecast for Kickstarter as an outfit is grave. "I think they'll be bought out," he says flatly. "What's happening here is that big publishers are extremely aware of the fact that the death knell could sound for them at any time. Many of the areas where they see a risk appearing, they jump in very quickly and buy themselves out of that risk. The Kickstarter guys are probably going to get an offer they can't refuse, and it'll destroy what Kickstarter is. That's the most likely thing to happen.

"You'll get a lot of promises. Quite likely, you'll get promises that they'll keep it the way it is. But remember RenderWare? I remember going to GDC and seeing 'business as usual' in big quotes – what a load of crap.

"RenderWare was basically ripped out of the market and put aside. That was at a time when it was extremely difficult for a startup to come up with a good render engine that was impressive enough to run on the new consoles and the PC. It was an entry [point] into the market for new developers, and EA closed it down. That's the modus operandi."

For now, at least, the sky isn't falling for either Kickstarter or the traditional publisher, though. In fact, given that awareness is as scarce a commodity as money nowadays, the two could, theoretically, quite happily coexist.

"We're a time-poor nation in the US," Carriker notes. "Grabbing attention is insanely difficult. It's why there are so many metrics out there that try to figure out how long people stay on one site, and all of that. And then just as many tools that promise to up those metrics and get those eyeballs in the right place. So, yes, I think some projects will still have to court traditional publishers or distributors to get that extra oomph."

"There are a lot of assholes," contributes Bell, "but some very good publishers out there.

"I think this whole industry needs to change back to when the talent were getting some sort of reward for their work, and that's what things like Kickstarter can be. That's what the App Store used to be before it was taken over by relationships and cliques. So that's it, that's where that desire comes from – the independent constantly fighting against the need to be tied into some huge corporate Borg-like entity." ■

INSIDE JOB

One of the less obvious issues raised by Double Fine's 'win' is Kickstarter's open-door policy on donors. "There's been some mixed reaction in the industry to game journalists funding the project, people finger-pointing and claiming they'll give biased reviews once the game is out, since [they] have a stake in it," Carriker notes. "I think that's nonsense. Game journalists are some of the nicest people I've met in this industry and they get enough flack. This is a unique opportunity and I say bravo for Double Fine, bravo for all the backers, and, man, do I want to play that game."

Return of the king

The creator of Final Fantasy, Hironobu Sakaguchi, fills us in on his long-awaited return to the director's chair with The Last Story

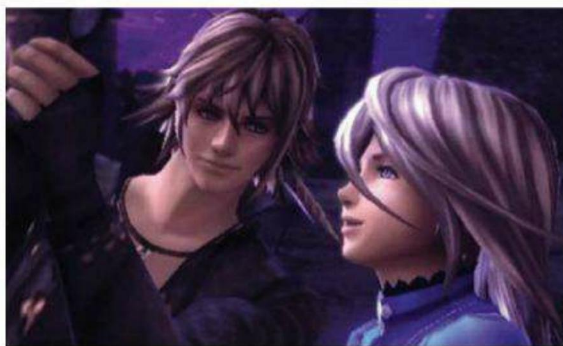
The way **Hironobu Sakaguchi** tells it, he only ever drinks two things: water and champagne. Ask him what inspires him as a game designer, and the founder of Mistwalker may well announce that nothing less than "the birth of a child, or the death of a close friend" will do the trick. Look back on his three-decade-long career and you'll see both massive successes (he created *Final Fantasy*) as well as company-shattering disasters (he's also the brain behind the ill-fated Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within film). Now, after 20 years as a producer, he's returned to direction with *The Last Story*, a big-budget RPG that has taken shape amid the most challenging conditions the Japanese industry has ever faced. We catch up with him to find out why the project required his personal touch.

The Last Story is the first game you've directed since _Final Fantasy V_ in 1992 – what made you want to return?
Before *The Last Story*, Mistwalker worked on *Blue Dragon* and *Lost Odyssey*, and these were pretty traditional orthodox RPGs. I've been making games [for] so long now that I can pretty much tell what will happen when I combine certain elements: it's like each game is an equation for me. What's interesting is that we got a lot of criticism from overseas, saying that both these games were quite outdated. *The Last Story* was born out of a need to answer that: to create a new battle system and to, in effect, abolish the equation I had from my *Final Fantasy* days. Because of that, I had to become a director again – to judge what was working and what wasn't at close range.

How has nuts-and-bolts development changed in your absence?
That's a very difficult question. In the age of *Final Fantasy V*, it wasn't 3D, of course, and things were still fairly basic sprite-based images. With 3D, the number of people needed to create a game increased massively, and that's a huge change. Individual team members have less of a view of the wider picture of a game. Before now, because the team was smaller, everybody could give feedback on the whole game, and as a result there was a really good atmosphere. As the team grew, everybody started to specialise, and they lost that wider picture, so discussions on how to improve the game became more difficult.

"With 3D, individual team members working on a game have less of a view of the wider picture"

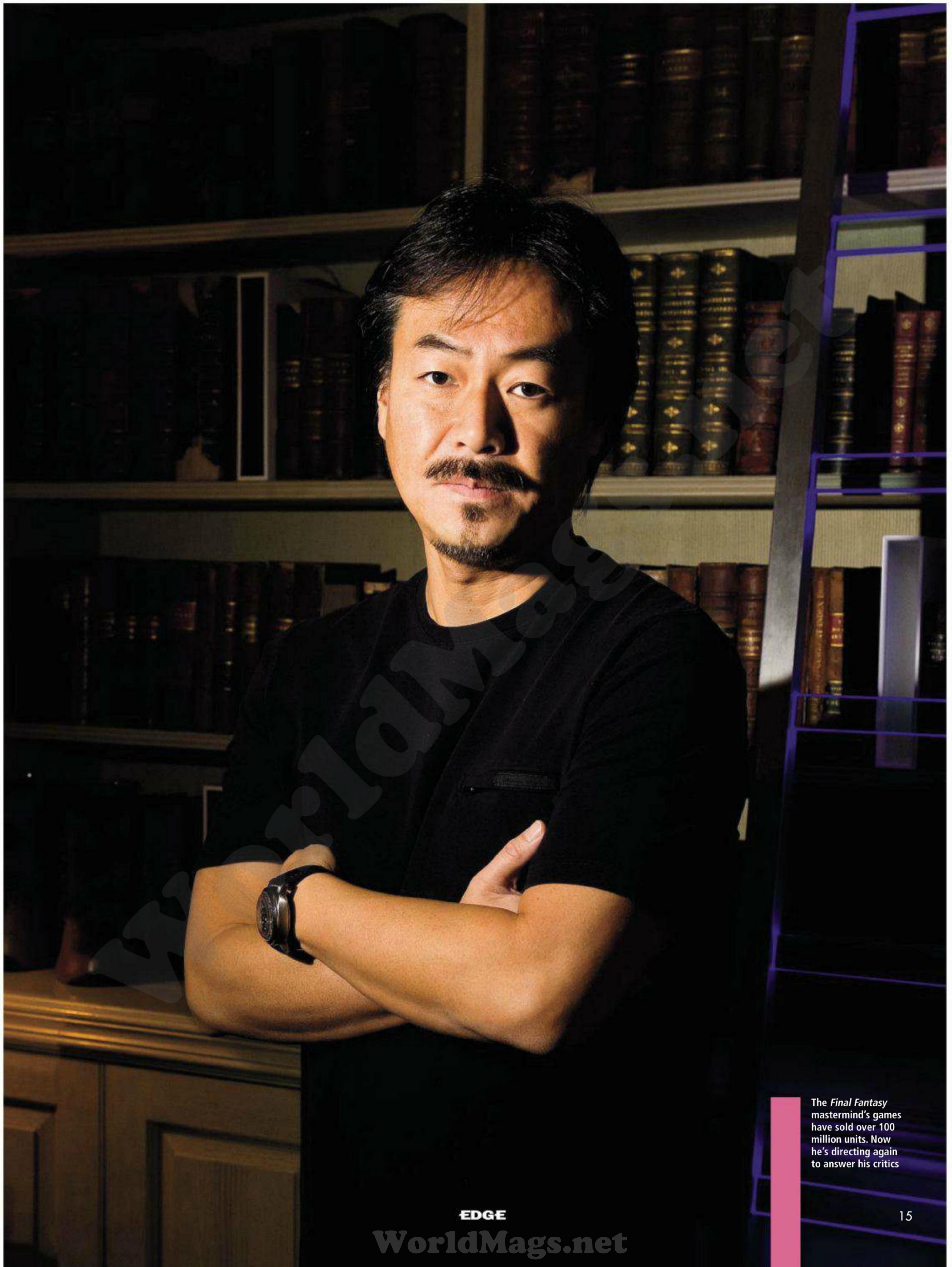
That must make your job a lot harder.
It would, but before *The Last Story* we decided to have an experimental phase. It lasted about a year, and it was an opportunity for all of the team members to give their opinions on how the game's systems worked – and how they work in detail. It was like going back to the *Final Fantasy V* era, where people would voice their own opinions and ideas, and we'd create the game while having a debate over the systems.


Sakaguchi says *The Last Story* has benefited from a phase of team-wide input

GRAND DESIGNS
The handful of games that Sakaguchi has overseen while at Mistwalker may not share their worlds or characters, but the developer still believes there are strong thematic ties between them. "One thing I've always wanted, even back in the day, was for the ending to be very heart-warming," he says. "I want the player to walk away with this warm feeling inside them. Also, although _Lost Odyssey_ and _Blue Dragon_ felt like they were slightly old-fashioned, there are always challenges I want to tackle in my games, and this links them together as well. For example, there's a famous author in Japan called Kiyoshi Shigematsu, and I incorporated his novel into _Lost Odyssey_ – that was a challenge that I don't think anyone else had ever attempted at that point, and hasn't attempted since."

How did that affect the finished game?
Over this period, the battling system was the most important aspect we looked at, but we also did a lot to look at the way the game flowed along from moment to moment. So we'd look at a scene where the party is moving through a cave, and one of the characters says that the cave is smelly, and another character says that they can't smell anything, and the party makes fun of that. That kind of chatting between the party was created during the experimental phase, and it worked so well we decided to put it into the rest of the game. When these detailed elements come together – when it fits with the more dynamic battle system – you get a really nice flow to things.

What do you make of Japanese tastes in RPGs at the moment? Do the likes of _Dark Souls_ and _Xenoblade_ suggest a shift to more eclectic designs?
As far as I can tell, in the age we live in, it's very uncertain times for people. In Japan, we had a huge earthquake, while there's also a global economic crisis. I think that in a time like this people are drawn to safe options rather than new games. They go for styles they're used to that are more accessible, and these are also easier to create. That said, I personally always think new things are better, even though creating new things takes a lot more work. ■



The *Final Fantasy* mastermind's games have sold over 100 million units. Now he's directing again to answer his critics

Solid Snake

A classic from the '70s arcade scene receives a procedural reimagining

Gameplay cloning may seem like a modern phenomenon – a product of Facebook copycats and ballooning app outlets – but it's been around for decades. Take *Blockade*: in some ways, Gremlin's 1976 arcade title has been forgotten, but see it in action and you'd probably remember it. Except that what you'd likely recall is one of its clones. In other words, you know the core game well, but you'd call it *Snake*.

Nokia made it famous by bundling the smart little time-waster with phones, but in a micro-studio in Cornwall, **Matt James** of Hermitgames (who made XBLIG shooter *Leave Home*) has rebuilt *Snake* in shimmering neon 3D and called it *Qrth-Phyl*. It's not quite ready for public consumption, but it's due by the end of 2012.

The game started life in 2004 during a burst of prototyping. "I made a ton of games really quickly during that summer," says James. "Going back through them now, I don't remember making most of them. But a 3D *Snake* felt good and stuck in my brain so much I wanted to finish it."

James had also heard about *Blockade*. "I was interested in how *Snake*-type games were really early videogames, but without a specific progenitor, like with *Space Invaders* or *Asteroids*. The story of the game type – cloned, repeated – fits well with the gameplay [in terms of] avoiding your past self, finding new space. I like trying to tie gameplay into themes, and create a feel and atmosphere. It's kind of an inverse metaphor, because you're looking at the more representational abstract stuff and evoking more complex human stuff."

James's thematic preoccupations fed into his peculiar approach for creating the levels this 3D snake would swim through and work around. He tinkered with procedural code while making *Leave Home*, a shooter that shuffles its stages, rebuilding itself on the basis of a player's performance, but *Qrth-Phyl* takes the process considerably further.

"I tried a load of different methods for building levels," says James. "I tried *Leave Home*-style random generation, taking level types then randomising certain parameters according to difficulty and game variables. The quality with this method lies with the quality of your generation rules. For *Qrth-Phyl*, however, I tried self-generating code, whereby I randomly mutate the rules that build the level. The key to this self-generation stuff is good success conditions. It generates a load of junk most of the time, but a good conditioner makes sure that's all thrown away and it only uses the quality generations. You can use the successful generations to breed more generations, and put the self-generation stuff in the game, and feed stuff back in as people play, so each game develops differently."

In *Qrth-Phyl*, then, every play session should become its own unique entity, just as every *Blockade* player ends up with their very own line. So the slow evolution of an arcade classic grinds onwards, and *Snake* continues to eat its own tail. ■

The slow evolution of an arcade classic grinds onwards, and *Snake* continues to eat its own tail

BLOCKUMENTARY

While making *Qrth-Phyl*, Matt James tracked down Lane Hauck, *Blockade*'s original developer. "He was really helpful and interesting, talking about the game's creation and Gremlin's failure to capitalise on it," James explains.

James discovered Hauck's approach to design wasn't so different from his own – a realisation that changed the course of development. "Lane was experimenting with making a game, like I do," he says. "With *Qrth-Phyl*, I started to move away from this snake creation story and I incorporated references and elements of the creation of *Blockade*. You alter and corrupt the game by playing it, and that reveals more of the documentary, so as you play you'll find areas that tell parts of the *Blockade* story – images, audio inserted into the game – all relating back to past *Snake* games."



www.bit.ly/xiZkVq
Hermitgames' home page



These luminous shards of hard light should be familiar to any veterans of *Leave Home*, while the 3D level designs recall Stephen Lavelle's recent puzzler *English Country Tune*



Ben Cousins' industry background, from ground-level jobs to top-tier management, gives him an informed perspective on the shifting sands of development practices

Free for all

Ben Cousins, general manager of mobile powerhouse Ngmoco's new Sweden studio, describes an industry in free-to-play transition

After starting out in quality assurance, **Ben Cousins** has slowly risen through the ranks to become head of Ngmoco Sweden. His career path – from designer and producer roles on traditional games such as *Battlefield* to general manager at EA's free-to-play-focused Easy Studios – reflects one of the topics that's been preying on his mind lately: the transition from consoles to tablets and high-end phones (AKA smart devices).

"My team and I are right in the middle of this transition, where I believe a lot of gamers are going to start spending more time on these new devices and maybe also playing in browsers," he tells us ahead of his keynote speech at the inaugural freemium-focused F2P Summit in London. "The transition we're going through has a lot of parallels between the transition that I personally experienced from the arcade to home consoles and PCs, which started happening in the early '90s. Right up through the early '90s, there was actually more money being made through coin-operated games in the US than through console games. There was this transition point in the mid-'90s where consoles just really took off – with PS1, basically. I started thinking about what it was about the PlayStation that catapulted it to really kick the arcades apart, and I think it was the fact that, if I remember rightly, the games on [it] looked almost as good as arcade games."

"Of course the console guys need retailers, because it's the only way people can buy the hardware"

While Cousins' projects are under wraps, he can confirm his team is looking to close the gap between consoles and smart devices. "What our studio is about is trying to take learning from the play patterns and business model of successful mobile games but create an experience that feels like – in terms of tone, graphics, production values – a console game. We'll be announcing our game in the next few months… We've got a studio full of veterans of the PC and console games business as well as people who have experience with freemium games, and we're about cross-pollinating those two streams of knowledge and trying to create something new and interesting."

A few years ago, the concept of a console-competing title on a phone or tablet might have been laughed out of the boardroom, let alone one using free-to-play monetisation. Cousins' latest venture is thus a further sign of the western industry's shift away from traditional ways of doing business. "If you look back five years ago, when I started out on this free-to-play adventure [at EA], what we were doing was weird," he says. "It had only been a success in Asia and lots of people felt that it was something special about Asian people that meant they were ready to buy virtual goods and maybe [it] wouldn't take off in the west. And if you look at where we are now, we've got a free-to-play social game company with a bigger market cap than EA, Zynga; we've got Valve and Blizzard making free-to-play games; we've got new phone and smart platforms where it's not going to be very long before the majority of revenue becomes free-to-play. If we start tracing that trajectory… it's going to be really interesting to see where we are. We could have a very different landscape."



F2P ASSOCIATION
With, as Cousins points out, the game industry facing a potentially massive shift in monetisation and development models, the F2P Summit in Shoreditch, London, is setting out its stall early and striving to inform and educate developers, publishers and IP holders on what's next and how to deal with it. The event takes place at the hip Rich Mix venue on March 28. For further info, and to register, head to: www.f2p-summit.com



www.bit.ly/yyharf
Extended interview with Ben Cousins

Cousins is well aware his predictions spell doom for some. "I personally would be concerned if I was working for a company that was firmly dependent on revenue from the traditional games business but wasn't in a particularly strong financial position," he says. "For me, that's like you're in a poor-performing horse-drawn carriage company and automobiles are taking off."

If the 'big three' don't move with the times, he says, they could be left behind. "I think what must be scary for the console guys, and this is a typical fear, is if they start allowing a free-to-play game on the platform then consumers would stop buying the premium software and the overall amount of revenue per user would drop. And this is probably true, but what we see in freemiums is your overall number of users increases. It's a big leap, and of course the console guys need retailers, because it's the only way people can buy the hardware, so they have to keep them happy, and really it's… They're in a difficult position. I'd love to know what's going on in the heads of the guys particularly at Sony and Microsoft, because there are some big decisions to make about the next generation, I think."

Cousins is adamant this isn't just a flash-in-the-plan trend. His vision of the coming decade will raise the eyebrows of those wholly invested in boxed console games: "In ten years' time, I think we'll see a lot of these companies [either] disappearing or becoming irrelevant, and it may well be that either their business gets smaller than it is now or it seems incredibly small compared to other companies that are growing hugely."

What tomorrow holds is anyone's guess, but it's hard to ignore a voice like Cousins', one backed by experience. ■

This is Build's unused *Lumines: Electronic Symphony* main cover image, which features in-game player icons and other graphics. Elements of it are used on the game's US and European inlays

DESIGN AND BUILD

Wipeout's graphic designers work on their second-ever game series: Lumines

When Psygnosis approached The Designers Republic to create branding for *Wipeout* in the mid-'90s, it seemed to herald a revolution. The distinctive result mixed Japanese pop culture with a corporate edge, and helped forge an identity the franchise is still mining today. But over 15 years passed and the designers behind it still hadn't worked on another game series – until now.

Wipeout drew *Lumines: Electronic Symphony* producer **James Mielke** to approach Build, a London-based studio founded by **Michael C Place**, *Wipeout's* designer at The Designers Republic, and Nicky Place, who was the futuristic racing game's team leader and artist at Psygnosis.

As with *Wipeout*, Build was contracted to design *Lumines: Electronic Symphony's* packaging, logo and an in-game typeface. "We didn't approach it with a videogame in mind," Michael says. "You're not going to get something that's different if you look to every other game, which is an explosion with some 3D bits coming towards you."

Build also avoided the *Lumines* series' existing graphic design. "We looked at it and then completely discarded it!" Michael explains. "Being brutally honest, I didn't think what had gone before was really cutting-edge. The game itself is pretty amazing, but the logo was horrific. It didn't convey what the game was. Our brief was to shake things up a bit – our only nod was to put a star over the 'i' [in the logo]."

Unsurprisingly, then, Mielke had to cajole Q Entertainment's development team into accepting Build's input. "I had to give tough love and say there's a difference between being a game designer and a game artist. Some of Q's guys are amazing designers – [look at] *Child Of Eden*, [or] guys who worked on *Rez* – but you need a completely different toolset when you're doing packaging for a global market."

Made under a short deadline, Build's cover was loved by Q Entertainment, but failed to satisfy all of Ubisoft's international marketing departments, which opted to use existing art. Build's font and logo remain, though, and hopefully so does its desire to do more games. After all, they still need a designer's eye. "There was a bad mistake on every game cover I looked at," Michael says. "They're just renders. A man with a gun shooting the shit out of somebody. There's a million ways of doing something like that." ■



Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"I think people are coming around to the idea that if we don't turn this around, **we could be sitting in some serious trouble.**"

Sony's new president and CEO to be, **Kaz Hirai**, on the company's dangerous days

"Am I supposed to take up drinking so that I can post embarrassing pictures of myself for my friends to see? I don't get it."



Epic's tech guru, **Tim Sweeney**, explains his struggle to engage with Facebook



"You're going to scare me into doing things secretly instead of being open and transparent via Twitter. **I am incredibly scared** of the very real risk of people feeling let down just because I took a chance at something that doesn't end up panning out."

After a full inbox of *Psychonauts 2* emails, **Markus 'Notch' Persson** is feeling a tad pressured

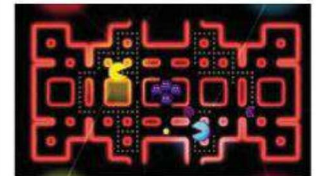
"Fumito's vision is really causing a very difficult challenge for the developers, so there's some scrapping and rebuilding – iteration in the process. That's why [it's taking so long]."



SCE's **Shuhei Yoshida** opens up on the trials and tribulations of *The Last Guardian*

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Pac-Man Battle Royale Deluxe
Manufacturer Namco Bandai

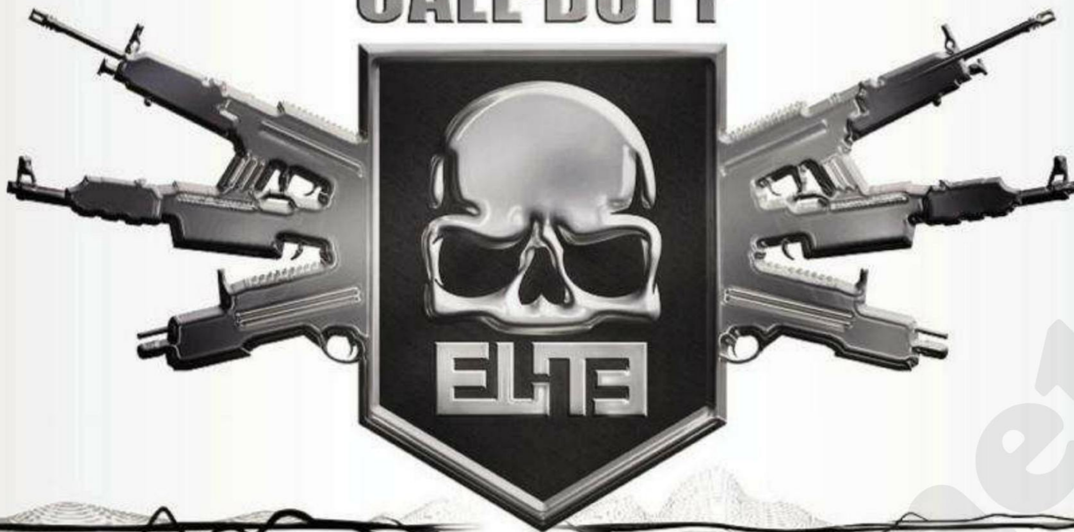
When *Pac-Man Battle Royale* hit the market last year, it would have been easy to see it as a novelty commemoration project to honour the yellow pellet-muncher's 30th birthday. Its bulky 'cabaret' (tabletop) cabinet, a replica of the 1980s version, popped up in bars and clubs, and was as likely to be showered with booze as coins.

Namco Bandai's decision to relaunch the game in a deluxe cabinet this year confirms the Japanese company's confidence in its mascot and also reaffirms the sense that the original heavy hitters of the arcade scene are still committed to their cause.

The refreshed cabinet caters to four players, each facing the grandeur of the 54-inch display and all bathed in a gloriously retro neon haze. Gameplay resurrects the chomp 'em all action of the original, but there's now a competitive element – players race to consume power pellets that super-size their character and allow Pac-on-Pac cannibalism – that will prove irresistible to hi-score fiends.

Rather than the novel distraction of last year's table-based machine, the deluxe cabinet is designed as a centrepiece attraction, beating its kitschy chest with pride. It's encouraging to see an icon of the arcade's early, golden years still alive and chomping with the aid of modern-day technology.




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My favourite game Scroobius Pip

Hip-hop's bearded poet on his biggest gaming addiction, leaderboards, and how Mario makes everything better

David Peter Meads (more popularly known by the handle Scroobius Pip) was launched into the public eye in late 2006 after releasing Thou Shalt Always Kill, a single he made with DJ Dan Le Sac. The accompanying video, which saw Pip tossing records aside and declaring legends from The Beatles to Radiohead "just a band", became a viral sensation. He's not just a music geek, however, which you realise very quickly once the subject turns to games.

Did you grow up with videogame consoles in the house?
Yeah, I was always a Nintendo guy. A mate of mine was a Sega guy, but I was always into NES and SNES and all that. I had Amigas and Spectrums as a really young lad as well.

Was that because your parents were tech-savvy themselves?
Not really, but my uncle was quite a gamer. He used to make Spectrum games himself. He had one of the programs where you could build a few things. We're at a level now where it's not easy to say, "Hang on, I'm going to make a game." It's a big old task, and we don't like our games small any more. They need to be developed for several years and be some huge beast of a game.

You've mentioned *FIFA* lately on Twitter. Are you a longtime fan of the series?
I've always been a fan of football games in general. *Championship Manager* is my greatest addiction to date, more than any alcohol or drug. One of the guys who works on it is a fan, and he offered me the new one when it was just about to come out. But I had to turn it down because I had my album on its way, and I'm releasing it on my own label, and I knew it would push the release date back by several months if I got *Championship Manager*, sadly. Because I'm self-employed, as it were, that's why I generally only get games like *FIFA* or beat 'em up games where I can step into it and have a few games and then walk away. My treat at the end of the last tour – because I knew I had a month off – was *Arkham City*. Because I knew I could allow myself to spend days upon end sitting there and getting into a really big game and devouring it.

RAP SHEET
Hailing from Stanford-le-Hope in Essex, Scroobius Pip got his start as a spoken word artist. Then he teamed up with electronic musician Dan Le Sac in 2006 and the pair released their first single, Thou Shalt Always Kill, later that year. The accompanying video has garnered over three million views on YouTube. Pip's debut solo album, Distraction Pieces, was released in September 2011 on his own label, Speech Development.



"I knew it would push my release date back by several months if I got Championship Manager, sadly"

You mentioned being a Nintendo guy – what were the games that cemented your fandom?
I still maintain to this day that any game in the world is improved with the addition of Mario. I mean, all the *Mario* games are amazing. When I was in America on tour a while back, and I had my DS, I picked up a Mario basketball game. It's just a basketball game, but it's ten times better when it's Mario – *Mario Basketball*, *Mario Kart*, *Mario Strikers*, all of them. I guess it's just the game developers, because it's got those ludicrous elements that let you escape from reality. With *Mario Basketball*, you're doing these crazy spinning slam dunks. I guess you could do that all on *NBA Jam* back in the day, but it's just that weirdness, that unusualness, and all the characters are incredibly well designed. It killed me when *Mario Olympics* came out and Sonic and Tails were in it. When I was growing up, they were mortal enemies. Now there aren't any Sega consoles and Sonic is whoring himself out... Obviously it's good for playing, but things like that are painful to see. I couldn't get my head around that for a long time. When I saw the two come up on the screen together, I was like, "Whoa, what's going on here?"

You have a Flash game called *Bash The Beard* on your Web site – how did that come about?
It was all because I got addicted to *Robot Unicorn Attack*. I got obsessed with that and got thinking, 'I need a weird little Web game'. I spoke to a few people, and we came up with this idea and built it, and it works really well. It's just a nice addictive little challenge game with a leaderboard. Some of the kids' scores on this game, I can't imagine how [they're] possible. I was playing it for a good month while it was being developed, and just four days after launch there were scores literally ten times as much as my top score.

What's your favourite game of all time?
Based on sheer number of hours it's taken from my life, I have to go with *Championship Manager*. It's the most addictive game, and it's bizarre because it shouldn't be. It's just stats and numbers and all that, but it's the greatest, most addictive game of all time. ■



www.bit.ly/Avvmtv
More gaming discussion with Scroobius Pip

Pip doesn't understand why *Portal 2* wasn't lauded more outside of gaming circles last year: "They could play that in schools and it would genuinely help teach kids higher-level thinking"

WEB SITE
Hookshot Inc.
www.bit.ly/zl2Bi2

A group of some of the finest game journalists working in the UK (and what do you know, all are contributors to **Edge**) have clubbed together to cover "any interesting or noteworthy sub-$15 videogame that can be downloaded, regardless of the platform". It's a tall order in the increasingly congested download market, but the Hookshot crew are off to a flying start with a balanced mixture of reviews, news and some creative interviews with the people behind the screens. Hookshot takes its games – and the money you'll be spending on them – seriously, with its finger on the pulse of the game industry's fast-expanding world of virtual goods. Even in its infancy it appears to be a solid source of up-to-the-minute information on in-development titles.





VIDEO
Real-life Goldeneye 64
www.bit.ly/zHuc8H

Life imitates art in this live-action rendition of Rare's still-unsurpassed classic *Bond* game. The mini-movie is a mash-up of levels that capture the spirit, rather than the exactitude, of the N64 shooter. Filmed in what appears to be a functioning warehouse or workplace, the makers manage to squeeze a huge amount of detail into this excellent and amusing homage/parody – from pitch-perfect deaths to Natalya's problematic path-finding. Could re-enactments of classic games be the new *Minecraft* remakes?

WEB GAME
Solitaire Blitz
www.bit.ly/x60GE9

You might think you already know solitaire, whether on your Windows desktop or via old-fashioned, real-life cards, but PopCap's interpretation is something else. Joining *Bejeweled* and *Zuma* in its one-minute score-attack *Blitz* range on Facebook, *Solitaire Blitz* is a furious card-counting adrenaline rush dressed in Captain Nemo's Art Nouveau trousers. The object is to clear consecutively numbered cards from the seven stacks at the bottom into three piles at the top. Matching colours and suits only matter as score bonuses, but the biggest rewards come from making long runs really fast. The music, performed by the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, and sound provide a tingle of drama, while Boosts offer extra strategy as you try to beat that one million score on your friend's leaderboard.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

A variety show of things that tugged at our attention during the production of **E**239

REPLICA
Portal Gun (www.bit.ly/x0CGJP)

There have been (surprisingly competent) fan films and (shockingly cool) fan-made replicas of *Portal*'s main tool already, but nothing quite as accomplished as this officially licensed Portal Gun. Produced by king of geek collectibles NECA, the $170 it'll cost you is a small price to pay to pretend you can shoot portals at walls. Now we just want a real-life Dog to protect it.



continue

Resident Evil GBA
A $20,000 fundraiser is all it takes to resurrect the dead. Who knew?

Disney Animation's Wreck-it Ralph
It *has* to be good, right? How can it not be good? Please make it good. Ta

Valve's official *Skyrim* mod
That's one crossover we didn't see coming

Journey
A trek, but we've finally reached our destination

quit

High street retail
Dark days for the distribution of physical media. Hold tight

***Soul Calibur V*'s Japanese print ads**
Is Tomonobu Itagaki heading up Namco's marketing nowadays?

Official *Binary Domain* cuisine
Who's up for some Spider Pasta? Hmm?

Vita UMD revivals
That Passport scheme was Japan-only, eh?

TWEETS

To Solitaire "inventor" circa 1885: we didn't clone, we just define innovation differently than rest of world. Also, you are dead
Jason Kapalka @jasonkapalka
Co-founder and chief game designer, PopCap

The more I RT the passonate tweet from fans, the more I get insult and lose followers. This is the phenomenon of twitter
Hideo Kojima @HIDEO_KOJIMA_EN
MGS *creator and head of Kojima Productions*

Now "attending" an online meeting from home with EA/PopCap execs, complete with PowerPoint. Doing it nude just because I can
Jeff Green @Greenspeak
PopCap's director of editorial and social media

The budget of *Monkey Island* was $135,000. Just saying
Ron Gilbert @grumpygamer
Designer/creator of Monkey Island



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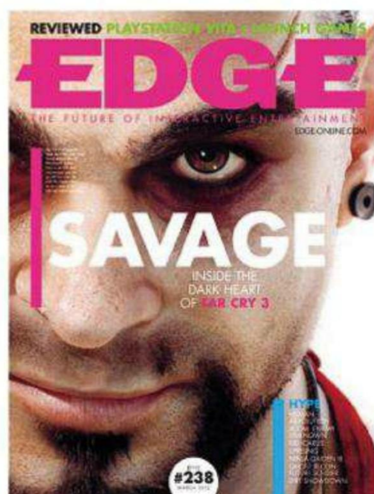


DISPATCHES APRIL

Within Dispatches this issue, Dialogue sees **Edge** readers pore over gaming's small details, question whether violence gets in the way of good experiences, and look at why mainstream games dominate retail outlets. Also: can Ubisoft's forthcoming *Far Cry 3* convincingly communicate an everyman character? In Perspective, **Steven Poole** ghillies up to take down *Modern Warfare 3*'s co-op, **Leigh Alexander** revisits an old JRPG and ponders its challenges, while **Brian Howe** relays the not-so-epic saga of a sidequest-obsessed knight.



www.next-gen.biz/forum
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers



Issue 238

Dialogue

Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Our letter of the month wins a 3DS



His master's choice

I am writing this letter in response to 'Stock shortages' in **E**237. I work in a branch of HMV, and I too have noticed the lack of support for gamers with a more developed palate. But I am here to tell you not to vent your frustrations at the store or even the company. Within HMV, at least, it's more of an issue of what our buying department thinks will make money. Most of the time this means lots of *COD*, *GTA* and *FIFA*, while less-mainstream games get bought more frugally and therefore distributed much more thinly. The recent release of *Skyrim* stands out as a title that has blurred the line between mainstream and underground game, with *Elder Scrolls* veterans being just as enthusiastic as newcomers to the series.

But we can't say this mainstream shift wasn't to be expected. Almost gone are the days of flicking through vinyls in search of that one record, and now gone too are the days of flicking through games in search of that one title. With such services as the App Store and Valve's Steam, gaming has become more accessible than ever, and with that comes disposability. It used to be that a game was entertainment enough for a year, if not more, but with some developers leaving the door wide open for a sequel we're lucky to get a couple of months out of one now.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that the retail industry is quite happy printing its own money by way of the mainstream game and has no reason to start pushing relatively underground titles. The fact of the matter is that supply is inextricably linked to demand and games like *El Shaddai* or *Tales Of The Abyss* will always get trumped by the latest *COD* or *Mario*. Ideally, every store would stock every game, but no one's willing to take that gamble, especially in today's market.
Elliott Marter

So many things play roles in sales and success, but isn't evangelising for less-mainstream titles, whether in the press, online communities or just plain old word of mouth, as vital to increasing demand as the number of copies on shelves? Perhaps not, but rest assured that we'll keep flying the flag. In the meantime, we're hoping that the financial problems of HMV and Game aren't so severe that finding a copy of something like *El Shaddai* on the high street will soon become even more difficult.

All in the detail

First, a note on subtlety. I was watching the making of Lord Of The Rings: The Two Towers, and apparently the various fighting styles of the different races were a mash-up of many kinds of martial arts. The purpose was to reinforce the fiction to the point where even martial arts masters would not be able to identify the techniques being used. Considering how niche the blade-master segment of the audience is, why would they go to that extent? If it was a game, all of the races would've been enrolled in a fourth-grade karate class so it was accessible. As in: hit X to make your guy swing in exactly the same-looking way every time.

It seems, when it comes to games, someone with a discerning eye is regarded with little importance. You guys should know – I'm sure you play more shit games than I even know exist. I know you have discerning eyes, because many of the games that have stood out to me over the years, as it turns out, Clint and Randy have had their hands all over. I'm not calling *Skyrim* shit – I'm currently entrenched in it – but imagine the result if they removed any and all repeating assets, and replaced them with a combat system that didn't smell like I do when I'm done working. Sure, it would drastically cut playtime down – oh no!

Second, as a general comment, context and content are too often confused. Story, characters, weapons, environments: all context that have nothing to do with what a game *plays* like. Let me ask you something: would you rather play a game that requires 100 hours to complete (run here, hit A, run there, hit A) or a game that contained satisfying, basic mechanics that simply made you want to play it for 100 hours?
Jim Hering

You're asking *Tetris* or *Skyrim*? Isn't that about as apples-vs-oranges as comparisons get? But we'll take *Tetris*. No, wait, *Skyrim*. OK, how about a *Tetris Skyrim* mod?

Here's to Nintendo's 4DS

Despite being a longtime fan of the magazine, I would just like to say how much I have enjoyed Brian Howe's column of late. I find his delightful spoofery to be the perfect antidote to some of the seriousness with which your writers have often treated their subject matter in the past. So much so that his influence appears to be leaking into some of the more usually po-faced contributions.

Maybe I'm the only one who'd prefer to read a whimsical prospectus on the potential gimmickry of Nintendo's 4DS rather than yet another go-nowhere argument as to why games should or shouldn't be considered art. Personally, the day when games become akin to some indecipherable French arthouse film is the day I stop playing. Until that day comes, I can't wait to get my hands on a 4DS.
Lee Cater

The dog days aren't over

I must say I was most pleased to see a mention of *Kane & Lynch 2: Dog Days* in your Still Playing column [**E**238], a game overlooked by many due to generally poor reviews. The cover mechanics and shooting are not the tightest, but far more believable for it, and added a real sense of chaos –

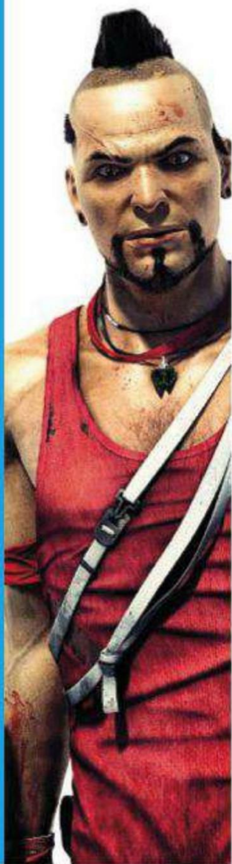
and dare I say humanity? – to the action. Having a sense of control removes you from any sense of urgency or danger; stripping it away makes the whole experience far more visceral and worthwhile. On top of that, the fragile, tense gameplay mechanics suited the subject matter and characters perfectly.

This led me to wonder about how *Far Cry 3*'s creators will achieve 'one man's descent into violence'? The biggest problem will be communicating the horror felt by a man who is not, I assume, used to firing weapons into crowds of armed lunatics to a player who has survived numerous FPS campaigns.

Maybe he should flinch or look away during the first few squeezes on the trigger, or even close his eyes for a split second? His aim could be barn-door-with-a-banjo accurate at first. It would add a sense of unpredictability that *Far Cry 2* tried with its breaking guns. All of this would obviously fade as he becomes accustomed to Nathan Drake-style levels of murder. Or maybe it would be too erratic, chaotic and frustrating at first and just send everyone running back to the slick, robotic set-pieces of *Call Of Duty*.
Michael Goodson

The SAS-like skills of *Far Cry 3* protagonist Jason Brody are at odds with Ubisoft's 'he's just like you' message, but does a publisher exist that's prepared to make an FPS in which our first impression of its controls is amateurish incompetency? And you're right: genre familiarity makes it difficult for studios to communicate the impact of taking a life to players accustomed to snuffing out hundreds per week. But it's a topic worth chewing over – which you can do as you get to grips with your new 3DS.

Michael Goodson asks how *Far Cry 3* will go in its bid to make you feel like an everyday Joe



Payned expression

Rockstar has clearly been eager to show off the putatively cinematic qualities of *Max Payne 3*, but while Rockstar's sequel has appeal, I cannot be the only person who thinks that one of the most conspicuous aspects of the game, namely its graphic violence, is somewhat uncinematic. Compare the game with any number of Hollywood action films and it seems incongruent by virtue of its excessive bloodletting.

Consider John McClane's showdown with Hans Gruber at the end of Die Hard. When McClane dispatches Gruber's final henchman with a headshot, does the latter's cranium disintegrate in a crimson firework display? No. A small wound appears on his forehead. And when McClane turns his gun on Gruber and shoots him out of a window, the audience is spared seeing the body crash into the pavement countless storeys below.

Of course, Hollywood has its fair share of gratuitously violent shooters, but these are usually films where the violence is intended to be comedic. When an OCP executive is obliterated by ED-209 in RoboCop, the point of the excess is to make a joke of the subsequent line about calling a paramedic. This kind of violence might be appropriate for slapstick shooters like *Gears Of War*, but it is entirely inappropriate for games like *Max Payne*. It is inappropriate because it is inimical to the gritty, cinematic realism which such games strive to achieve. Consider, in this context, Verhoeven's comments on the 2007 anniversary-edition RoboCop DVD about how the cuts to Murphy's death scene for the film's theatrical release rendered it more disturbing. The point is that if what is being aimed for is a serious, gritty tone, then when it comes to violence, less is often more.

> If what is being aimed for is a serious tone, then when it comes to violence, less is often more

Of course, extreme violence in films isn't only ever used for comic effect. Sometimes, of course, it is supposed to be unsettling. But, again, such violence is inappropriate for the kind of shootouts that take place in films like Die Hard and games like *Max Payne*, which are supposed to be entertaining.

It is often asked whether the violence in contemporary videogames is really necessary. My claim is not just that it is unnecessary, but that it actually threatens to undermine the quality of potentially great titles.
J Chris

The point certainly has legs when looking at *Payne*'s Hollywood inspirations, but Rockstar and Remedy have taken as many cues from Hong Kong cinema. Surely you can't do justice to such themes without several rivers' worth of the red stuff. ■

ONLINE OFFLINE

Your responses to topics on our Web site at www.edge-online.com

In eight hours, Double Fine reached its Kickstarter funding target of $400,000 for a PC point-and-click adventure, and hit a million dollars within a day. Has the studio just killed the publisher?

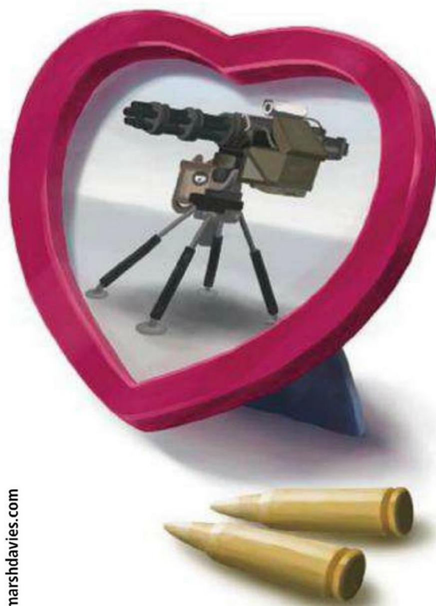
Fantastic achievement but a one-off from a hugely established figure in very special circumstances. Oh, and it's for the PC – imagine something like this happening for a console developer.
Danmaku Wadeson, Facebook

I think it's great and simultaneously tacky. Double Fine shouldn't be begging money from its fans to make games. It's also really cool that they can do that and raise funds that fast.
Jaks, Edge website

It's great for Double Fine, and I'm really happy for them, but for the rest of the little no-name indies this doesn't change anything.
Tasha, Edge website

Now, how about a Kickstarter fund for *Streets Of Rage 4*?
Yossarian, Edge forum

Don't make a point-and-click adventure, Schafer. Make *Shenmue 3*.
Bollockoff, Edge forum



marshdavies.com



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Why Modern Warfare 3 is a masterclass in how to take an enjoyable co-op mode and utterly ruin it

Let me tell you how it used to go down in Wetwork on Veteran in *Modern Warfare 2*. Materialising conveniently on the oil rig, we'd breach the first room and save the first set of hostages. Then we'd gun into easeful death the gang of enemies outside, duck back into the room to pick up a Stinger, cap some more guys coming round the corner, and daintily deploy a lot of claymores around the bottom of the stairs. We'd go up the stairs and dash to cover under a tempest of bullets. I'd missile the helicopter in its searchlighty face, then we'd sprint back downstairs, luring our silly gun-toting pursuers through what we came to fondly call 'Claymore Village', chuckling at the soft booms of mines going off. And that was just the beginning of an elaborate plan. My comrade had a penchant for accidentally shooting hostages in the terrified eyes during the very last breach, which meant dozens of replays of the mission, each lasting half an hour. But we didn't mind, because within the basic structure of our plan things would play out differently, and it would always be enjoyable to improvise a solution.

Or take Wardriving: once we'd sanitised the suburban street with the help of the lovably named Honey Badger tiny tank, it was all about setting up a defence in each house before starting the download that would trigger hordes of uncivil aggressors. What guns should we choose? Where should we put the claymores? How best to deploy the sentry guns? (Ah, I did love my turrets. A few months ago I passed a house in Spain with a ground-floor garage, and my first thought was: 'Good place to put a sentry gun.')

Some of the tensest moments, leading to the sweetest victories, were the finite wave-defence missions, such as Sniper Fi and Homeland Security. We had all the toys (thermal scopes, turrets and the Predator), and just needed to hunker down and survive a set number of increasingly ferocious killstorms. Getting to the ten-second period of downtime before the final wave, and wondering if we could do it, induced real adrenaline-pumping suspense.

> Some of the tensest moments, and the sweetest victories, were the finite wave-defence missions

And then *Modern Warfare 3* gaily ballsed it up. All the wave-defence missions have been shunted into the new Spec Ops Survival mode and made unwinnable, because there are theoretically infinitely many waves. This rips all the suspense out of them, and makes them profoundly boring. (If you're going to go infinite-unwinnable like a '70s arcade game, it doesn't make any sense to call it a 'mission', which implies that success is at least possible. If there is zero possibility of survival, be frank and call it 'Suicide Ops'.) And the regular missions are tear-jerkingly devoid of turrets, while offering just five claymores on a single mission (Server Crash), whose defend-the-basement moment is the last vestigial remnant of what was so enjoyable in *MW2*. Essentially, the whole idea of inventive defence has been thrown out of the window.

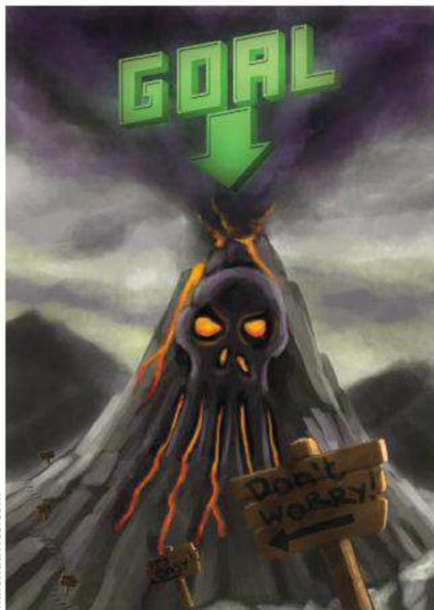
Some reviewers of *MW3* declared, mysteriously, that the Spec Ops mode had been 'improved'. I guess they were just impressed by the shiny yet superficial 'feature' improvements, such as a new mode or the increase in vehicular pandemonium, and didn't have the time to devote dozens of hours to co-op play to discover that it is more shallow.

There are still gorgeous killspree moments, of course: the submarine assault, Over Reactor, is moodily frantic enough to justify (for once) a time limit; while Flood The Market, an attack on the New York Stock Exchange, is glass-shatteringly thrilling – and an amusingly explosive literalisation of the Occupy Wall Street protests.

Nonetheless, overall *MW3* does something instructively wrong. Whereas I have previously sneered at modern games' ambition to become circus-like aggregators, bundling disparate game styles into one desperate-to-entertain campaign, *MW3*'s mistake in Spec Ops is exactly the opposite. It has disaggregated the various modes of strategic and tactical combat – the alternating rhythms of attacking gunplay, downtime, planning and just barely bloody hanging on – that were fused in its predecessor's best missions, and quarantined them into modes, one of which is pointless except for the consumerist purpose of levelling up.

In sum, *MW3* leaves less room for tactical creativity, which is just what its forebear's missions encouraged: designing the joyfully fatal architecture of Claymore Village; curating optimal turret placements in Wardriving or Body Count; and, just for kicks, winning the we'll-be-like-ghosts-in-this-blizzard Acceptable Losses in two ways, with perfect stealth and by murdering every last snow-suited fool in the whole airbase. (Plus, for good measure, smashing up the planes.) I fondly hope *MW3* might give us more of what we want in DLC, but at the moment it is just less interested in our tactical creativity. The sad consequence, as for any game that restricts the player's range of expression, is that we are less interested in it. In the meantime, in rosy memory I hear the sweet echo of my own hoarsely hysterical scream, which never alerted a single enemy soldier: "Planting claymore!"

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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

The JRPG is in decline, but why? Could it be the fault of developers afraid to ask too much of players?

Lately, I've been revisiting *Chrono Cross*, an RPG released in 2000 by what was then called Squaresoft. If it goes criminally underrated, that's because it is a thematic follow-up, although not a sequel per se, to 1995's widely loved and quite refined *Chrono Trigger*. I would love to be able to make the argument that *Cross* is a better game than *Trigger*, but I can't in good conscience pull that off, no matter how much I love getting inebriated and starting fights on Twitter. Also, GameSpot apparently gave it a perfect score back in the day, which takes some of the wind out of my 'underrated' argument anyway.

Chrono Cross is a gorgeous game with a memorable aesthetic. The omnipresent ocean gives the game's world a dreamlike, timeless air that suits its narrative about lost selves and parallel realities. Its visual palette spans pink corals, glowing phosphorescent greens and violet textiles. As impressive as its soundtrack is the fact that the game knows when to be quiet and leave you alone with the whistling wind and the sighing sea.

It's melodramatic, often vague and sprawling, but utterly lovely. It's the sort of showpiece that encapsulates the heyday of the Japanese RPG, a High Classical period that's since fallen off, leaving the genre sparse-picked and clumsy, and struggling to find its way among modern audiences.

I haven't played *Final Fantasy XIII-2*, the newest RPG from Square Enix, but I don't feel a particular urge. A couple hours of *FFXIII* were enough for me, as they were for even some longtime fans of the franchise, who are famous (notorious) for their tolerance and willingness to accept every one of its absurd conventions. JRPG fans are difficult to deter, but somehow Square Enix is leading the charge.

FFXIII-2's mixed reception highlights many problems, but the mistaken idea that modern features or design elements will somehow save a foundering ship seems like the main one. Playing older JRPGs is the quickest way to get up close to the dissonance we see with the current crop – *something* is gone, something isn't working any more, and attempts at evolution just seem to be making it worse.

> You don't have to be a masochist to appreciate a little vagueness, a little challenge, even a little repetition

Games in general have developed the commercial need to be as widely appealing and accessible as possible, and the result has been an approach to experience design that focuses on reducing friction. This approach says that players' objectives should always be clear, players should be spared unnecessary expense of time on tasks such as backtracking, should never have to repeat themselves, and should never feel they're being penalised unfairly.

The language of the player's experience is always made clear, with the gameworld sending players well-understood shorthand – glowing doorways, enemy gates – so that they never lose sight of what the game wants them to do. And I'm not sure exactly when completion became so important in conversations about game quality, but it certainly did, and now any trait that might deter a player from finishing a game gets gently buffed out.

This intolerance of confusion and frustration has created something of a counter-culture backlash, with underground favouritism toward cruel games. *Dark Souls* and *The Binding Of Isaac* are just two examples, plus there are numerous games on the indie scene whose mechanics thrive on misleading players and subverting their expectations.

But you don't have to be a masochist to appreciate a little vagueness, a little challenge, even a little repetition. I think game developers have begun misestimating our tolerance for frustration and boredom, and give too little credit to how persistent we're willing to be when we're engaged. Furthermore, we get engaged by owning and mastering a game space on our own terms.

Back to *Chrono Cross:* it gives the player subtle location cues for the main story arc, but this game's pleasures lie in its myriad sidequests and in recruiting a wide array of party members, often through obscure means. While I loved it in its time, replaying it nearly requires a rewiring of my brain; it's not a difficult game, but neither is it going to understand what I want and then brandish it before me. Marching through a progression of battles in a long, sprawling dungeon, I thought about how no one would ever design even a level, let alone a whole game, in this fashion any more. And that it was kind of a shame. I didn't exactly take pleasure in battle after battle with crews of bats or sorting out a large maze, but there was a strange sort of Zen in the goal-oriented behaviour. Glimmers of boredom and frustration only enhanced my dedication to finish the tasks at hand. And triumphing over them felt like an accomplishment, a relief, a moment of feeling spiritually connected to the story, instead of another pop-up achievement.

RPGs, especially the way they've historically been made in Japan, rely on exploration, repetition and vast seas of patience. That's probably why the genre has been the one hurt the most by new models of design that say players need to be told what to do and receive no friction. The focus on immediate gratification is a major barrier to actual investment and immersion in games.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media



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BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

With the kingdom facing a mortal threat, is taking on sidequests really a prudent use of our hero's time?

Cringely, my faithful advisor! A whole season has waned since we dispatched your hand-picked champion, Sir Aloysius Dwayne Heinrich Donhubris, to seal the Ancient Rift. Yet still the Ancient Rift howls. The hordes of the Black Dragon chew away at the borders of our beloved Wome, and the world teeters on the very brink of destruction. What news?"

"The quest proceeds essentially as planned, your highness. There have simply been some unforeseen… delays."

"Delays? What could be so pressing as to cause delays, as the ravening minions of Hellmack pour out of the Rift, and Wome herself hangs by a thread?"

"There is a perfectly reasonable explanation, sire. Immediately after receiving your royal seal, Sir Donhubris came across a ransacked wagon outside the castle, where a little girl wept bitterly among her slaughtered family. Pitying the poor creature, the good knight rousted the murderous bandits from the hills and then escorted the girl to the orphanage in Rustica, which was right on his way to the Ancient Rift. So you see, my lord, he was doing the King's work, and God's."

"Yes, I suppose. Send him some kind of medal. Though also, Cringely, beseech him to let the local constabulary handle such matters in the future, for lo, every day the Rift widens, and every night the Black Dragon lays another sulfurous egg in its foul nest. And could this virtuous diversion have really taken these several months?"

"Well, no, your mercy. You see, Sir Donhubris found the townspeople of Rustica in a deplorable state. One villager's husband had been defiled by a succubus, one had lost a treasured keepsake down the cloaca, and the other needed shepherding across a poisonous swamp. Feeling it his duty to the King's subjects, our steward helped them all, expending considerable time and resources."

"By my troth, this Donhubris of yours is a most charitable and thoroughgoing knight! Also send him treasure, and hams. And now tell the throne of his doughty contest with the Black Dragon, which must surely have occurred directly after the most valorous adventures that you have described."

> What could be so pressing as to cause delays, as the minions of Hellmack pour out of the Rift?

"Ahem. Not quite, your grace. Apparently, after resolving every domestic squabble in Rustica, Sir Donhubris was enlisted by a local friar to seek out and destroy a vampire: Fangborn. Thus did he set off across the Stonehorn Mountains."

"I know not whether to be glad or enraged, Cringely. This is hardly the right time for such a mission, and yet Fangborn has long been a thorn in my side. Have your hero send me the vampire's head to mount in my lodge, and in gratitude, I shall forget about his well-intentioned dereliction of duty."

"Alas, Donhubris never brought his quest to slay Fangborn to completion, my liege. He set out full of boldness and good faith, but on his way through the Stonehorn Mountains he chanced across the annual gladiatorial contest in the dwarf city of Wardong and decided to enter – to carry forward the greatness of your banner, of course. He was victorious!"

"God's bollocks, Cringely! This worthy yet wayward knight begins to test my patience with his caprice. What does the crown of Wome care for some flyspeck dwarven arena while the Pale Ghouls of Minerva paddle through the Sea of Tears, and the Pit Demons of Razz stir in the Demon Pits, and…"

"Then you aren't going to be happy about the archery contest, my lord. He won that as well, although it required 38 consecutive tries. Then he spent a long while gambling at cards and races in Milbrew, and skipped over to Fartais to study smithing and runery. He got embroiled in some intrigues in the court of Scaroon, opened his own Moomy ranch in Maje, and did quite a lot of courier work. Then, questing for a legendary whistle, he became lost for some weeks in the Fog Islands… Sire? Why the wrathful visage?"

"I am mastering my temper. It is hard to think straight with the Wyverns of Mimifriss darkening the sky, and our champion off breeding Moomies in Maje. But pray, do go on."

"Next, my liege, Sir Donhubris set out in search of 50 iridescent butterfly wings."

"Of course he did. I don't need to know every insignificant detail, Cringely."

"This actually took a month, your magnanimity. There were only 50 butterflies in existence, scattered all over the continent, and their wings were said to be exceptionally tasty. Sir Donhubris seemed to believe that eating all the wings would make him better at picking locks, but his reports were rather confusing."

"Enow! Enow! This is nonsense. Tell me what's really going on here, Cringely, lest the national razor find both your necks!"

"Very well, your lenience, I must come clean: Sir Donhubris has pretty much defected. Instead of the Black Dragon, he now hunts strange beasts he calls 'completion percentage points'. Whatever they are, he says he must get one hundred of them. Then, God willing, Sir ADHD will remember the King's mission. The Black Dragon will surely keep until then."

Brian Howe writes about books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Kill Screen

#239



THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

Lands without border



www.bit.ly/it2QiG
Up-to-the-minute
previews and reviews

This issue's Hype brings forth two high-profile titles, playable entirely offline and alone, that are set in vast open worlds. As free-to-play gaming creeps ever closer to dominance of the MMORPG, we're seeing the tricks and trades of that genre hoovered up by action-game developers, enriching and enhancing titles that might otherwise have been shallow exercises.

Borderlands 2 (p42) and *Dragon's Dogma* (p52) seek to deliver realtime combat thrills on a canvas of choice and consequence rarely seen in the FPS or thirdperson action-adventure genres. Both games lay simple, familiar mechanics over a skeleton of complex RPG statistics. Your choice of class is as crucial to your encounters with the deranged human waste of *Borderlands 2* as the speed of your trigger finger, and it's as determinate a factor in the flow of *Dragon's Dogma's* battles as your ability to chain combos.

The question is whether or not the marriage of two genres at polar ends of the time-investment spectrum can be a happy one. Action games are known for tight, tense bursts of activity – 30-second loops of meticulously designed fun that, at their best, offer scope for both pick-up-and-play gaming and prolonged sessions. *Dragon's Dogma*, in particular, from thirdperson-action powerhouse Capcom, is a game that has much of the appeal of a fighting game, with its light/heavy attacks, and a great sense of weighty physicality. But it also requires an investment of time per session to truly unlock the world's riches, something that may deter hack-and-slash aficionados.

The free-to-play movement is the MMORPG's solution for the time-deficient player, but the traditional singleplayer console experience has no such remedy in waiting. Is it really time for optional in-game purchases to make their way to open-world action extravaganzas alongside all of those stats?

MOST WANTED

Hawken PC
The Unreal-powered mech shooter goes into beta and gets a December release date. Confirmed as free-to-play, it looks to offer the cheapest way to obliterate friends since, well, forever.

Samurai & Dragons Vita
You've got to love a high-concept title. *Yakuza* veteran Masayoshi Kikuchi aims to bring strategy and action together in one unique portable package. The hacking and slashing has an air of *Gauntlet* about it, while the strategy scenarios offer a classic *Civ* flavour.

Gunslinger Stratos Arcade
Square Enix is primed to publish this four-vs-four arcade shooter. The airborne action flows at a solid 60fps on a 60-inch plasma screen, with players making use of two lightguns that can be clipped together to transform your shooting style. *Stratos* will deliver something home consoles can't, which should mark it for plenty of attention.



H | Y
P | E

BORDERLANDS 2

Deep in the wilds of Texas, Gearbox is planning to reopen Pandora's box

Publisher	2K Games
Developer	Gearbox
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	US
Release	September

***Borderlands 2's* classes may be different, but its art direction is instantly recognisable. Salvador the gunzerker is every bit the answer to the original's Brick, and new foes also feature familiar B-movie detailing**



BORDERLANDS 2



RIGHT **The environments are larger, but you'll still be moving between separate locations. The art team's been focusing on skyboxes, however, ensuring that the horizon offers a better sense of where you're going and where you've already been**



Co-op returns, and you'll be able to play splitscreen online. We hope this means the menus have been adjusted for the small screen space this time



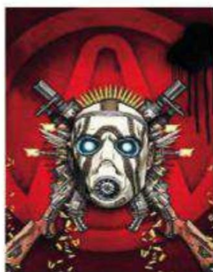
Admit it: you first came to Pandora for the guns. If you stayed, though, it was probably the classes that kept you there. Perhaps you were bound tight by the staticky loops of a Siren who phasewalks from one SMG blast to the next, dealing electrical damage as she goes. Or maybe you were deep within your role as a berserker, chaining face-pulping blows together as you hopped across the jagged landscape. In an age of often misguided genre fusion, *Borderlands* pulled off an enviable job, combining RPG and shooter mechanics in a way that delivered some of the best aspects of both. It offered meaningful character customisation choices that enhanced a series of exhilaratingly messy combat encounters, and with a handful of distinct builds to pick from, the loot – all 87 billion pieces of it – was just a sweetener.

Four million copies and dozens of memes later, this is where the conventions of game sequels are meant to take over. As such, *Borderlands 2* should represent little more than a refinement to the existing character classes and a gentle pollarding of the skill trees. The problem with that assumption, though, is that nothing about *Borderlands* has ever been particularly conventional.

And so, for Gearbox's return to Pandora, the first game's characters have moved on and taken their action skills with them. They've passed from party members to NPCs in a plot that sees a terrifying new sheriff come to town in the form of Handsome Jack, the new CEO of the Hyperion Corporation. With the original vault hunters incarcerated or AWOL, the stage is set for four new heroes to emerge. While they build on some of the concepts established with Brick, Lilith, Roland, and Mordecai – to use the kind of stereotyping Gearbox has always side-stepped, you can still expect a heavy, a magic user, an all-rounder, and an assassin – there's a brilliantly unstable blend of new ideas waiting for you as well.

First up is the 'gunzerker'. A significant evolution of the berserker archetype, he's a lumbering angel of death whose stocky design marks him out as the quintessential tank. There's more freedom of expression available than you might expect, though. "This time around, instead of diving in and doing a lot of up-close melee combat, he's about using two guns simultaneously," explains **Paul Hellquist**, Gearbox's creative director. "You've done dual-wielding in games before, but usually it's very limited: it's certain weapons and certain combinations. We didn't want to do that at all. With our millions of guns, that feels like a disservice. This is all about finding the best combination of weapons for you,

The grenade modding system returns in expanded form for this sequel, and the first few hours of the campaign will likely be dominated by the hunt for the perfect loadout



Americ-argh!

With its pumpkin patches and naff roadside concessions, Pandora equals Liberty City as a place in which to explore the excesses of America. "I'm not sure we have a particular goal to satirise anything," Cooke says, "but as we design an area, we like to try to find interesting themes that have a little more beneath the surface. I think that gives our creative folks more to work with, whether they're designing a mission or creating an asset. There's definitely a little social commentary in there, too. It's hiding down low – we're not all about making speeches and stuff – but if you look for it there's hopefully a lot to get your teeth into."



LEFT *Borderlands 2* features new vehicles and – even better – new handling, with the original's rather wonky steering now augmented by welcome drift abilities

whether that's matching pairs or using a pistol and a rocket launcher."

New Siren Maya, meanwhile, takes Lilith's defensive 'phase' skills and turns them into something more aggressive. As art director **Jeramy Cooke** explains: "While Lilith could phasewalk, Maya can phaselock, capturing an enemy in a sphere, lifting it off the ground and crushing it. You're either using that in a crowd control way or, if you're playing co-op, using it [to pick a] primary target: lift it up there and let others blast away at it."

Lean and handsome, like a weaponised George Clooney, Axton replaces Roland as the all-rounder. "Axton's our commando, and he's an evolution of the soldier class," Hellquist explains. "The soldier was by far the most popular class in *Borderlands*, and we thought that eliminating his sort of turret-spawning tactical play would be a disappointment."

That said, the team's been hard at work bringing a little more excitement to the role for this sequel. "We knew we didn't want to just do the same stuff. Like Roland, Axton has a turret as his action skill, but it's significantly more impressive: you can spend skill points in your tree and the turret will evolve, getting new abilities and attachments, giving it new attacks, but also changing it visually. So you can see a friend's turret and get a pretty good sense of their skills and spends off of that alone."

The last of the four is possibly the most interesting. "The final character is our assassin, Zero," says Cooke. "We want to connect him to the story in an interesting way. He's enigmatic and robotic, and we hope he'll spark debate and that people will want to dig into where he comes from."

Zero's action skill is called Deception, and it presents a typical *Borderlands* kind of trade-off: do you want to hit hard, or hit often? "When he goes into Deception mode, not only can he see the enemy more clearly, picking them out on the battlefield and analysing their critical-hit locations, he'll also serve as a decoy and distract other enemies," Cooke explains. "It's a bit Predator-like, allowing him to either snipe from a



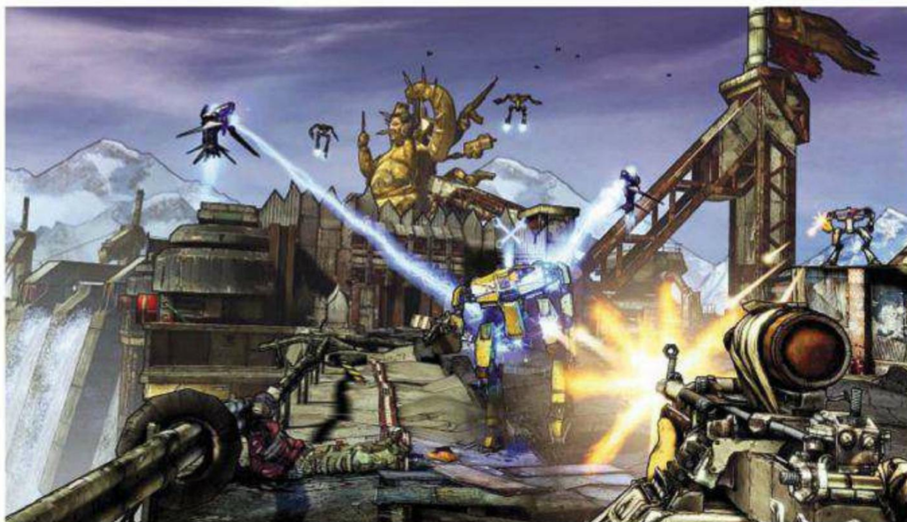


www.bit.ly/AuzfpI
Screenshot gallery



BORDERLANDS 2

Bandits now drop their own classes of weapons, with hand-made scopes and patchwork designs. They may not be particularly pretty to look at, but they all come with huge clips



distance or go for critical strikes with his sword. And players can actually balance how much time they want to spend in this mode. The more time they spend in Deception, the more damage their attacks deal, but the less time, the quicker the skill resets. There's some dramatically different play styles you can get with that: do you want to jump in and out of Deception all the time, or do you want to make that one perfect strike?"

The greatest pleasure of *Borderlands* was the way that a character's action skill created a smart little loop that provided the pace for each encounter – and, as Zero suggests, that's an idea that's been lodged deep in the designers' minds as they've assembled their new cast. "If anything, we're trying to create more variety in these classes and their skills," Cooke explains. "A lot of people who played the Siren first time, for example, just focused on area-of-effect damage and close-range combat. As we developed the new classes, we want to make sure each of their three skill trees really brought unique gameplay styles and unique loops. We want everyone who tries a class to go in and be able to find three core loops, in fact. And inside of those, we want to expand on individual skills that will change the way you play, allowing you to modify those loops even further. We've created things called One Point Wonders, for example: you put a single skill point into them and they give you an ability that really changes your options and the style you use. At the very high level, you can start planning multiples of these and really go to town."

"It's about accentuating the flow you get from whipping out all these different guns"

So gunzerkers will be able to explore skill trees focusing on maximising their time spent, and effectiveness while, dual-wielding; boosting survivability; and, most ambitiously, manipulating weapons to chain boosts. "If you want, you can gain a bonus for switching guns," Hellquist says. "It's about accentuating the flow you get from whipping out all these different guns and really using the arsenal."

Elsewhere, Maya can be tailored for crowd control, healing, or area-of-effect attacks, while Axton's skill choices come down to building on his turret's strengths, improving his weapon handling, or gaining tactical advantages from his equipment (a hint, perhaps, that life-restoring bullets might return). Zero's trees, meanwhile, largely relate to his power trade-off, allowing you to pick between cultivating his ranged and melee skills, or tweaking his movement abilities. Zero has the potential to be disruptive: it

Q&A

Jeramy Cooke
Art director, Gearbox

Paul Hellquist
Creative director, Gearbox



***Borderlands* had over a million different guns. How do you stop players from finding a favourite and sticking with it?**

Jeramy Cooke We sort of love it when people fall in love with a gun, because that puts them in a very interesting situation. The longer they want to hang on to it as they level up, it puts the pressure on them to play better as enemies get stronger, and it also puts pressure on them to consider upgrading as new stuff comes along. It makes them ask an interesting question each time loot drops: can I really replace my baby?

For a sequel, how do you add to such a huge arsenal in a meaningful way?

JC So if you've got 87 bajillion guns, making it 88 bajillion doesn't necessarily make it more interesting. Instead, what we realised was that in the first game quite a lot of the guns were visually and behaviourally quite homogenous. They were just stat upgrades. What we want to do now is widen the differentiation between the manufacturers. So Dahl, our modern military manufacturer, has guns with camo. Maliwan, our sci-fi outfit, has glowing elemental effects and bold stripes. It hopefully allows people to identify with the guns even more closely. We also hope people won't just fall in love with one gun, but with an entire manufacturer. We want them to smack-talk their friends about this sort of thing.

Paul Hellquist And all that stat richness is still a critical part of the weapons... Before, if you had an elemental weapon that caused fire, you had a simple differentiation of how good the fire was based on a kind of 1x or 2x definition. This time, you'll actually see how good your chances of catching someone on fire is, and how hot that fire will be. And then on top of that, each manufacturer's gun behaves very differently... Dahl's about stability and burst fire. They don't have a lot of kick: they shoot in bursts and are very effective in precision ways. Jakobs is our Old West manufacturer: it's all about hitting really hard and fanning. You only get one shot per pull of the trigger, so it's up to how quickly you can [fire]. Tediore, meanwhile, is a consumer, disposable weapon: instead of reloading, you throw the weapon at an enemy and it explodes.

Borderlands was one of the first games to prove that sci-fi shooting didn't have to be all brown and grey. Expect vivid, even lurid, art design for the follow-up

Handsome Jack's orbital depot looms above Pandora and means he can despatch Hyperion foot soldiers to any point on the planet within seconds. They land with body-shredding force, too



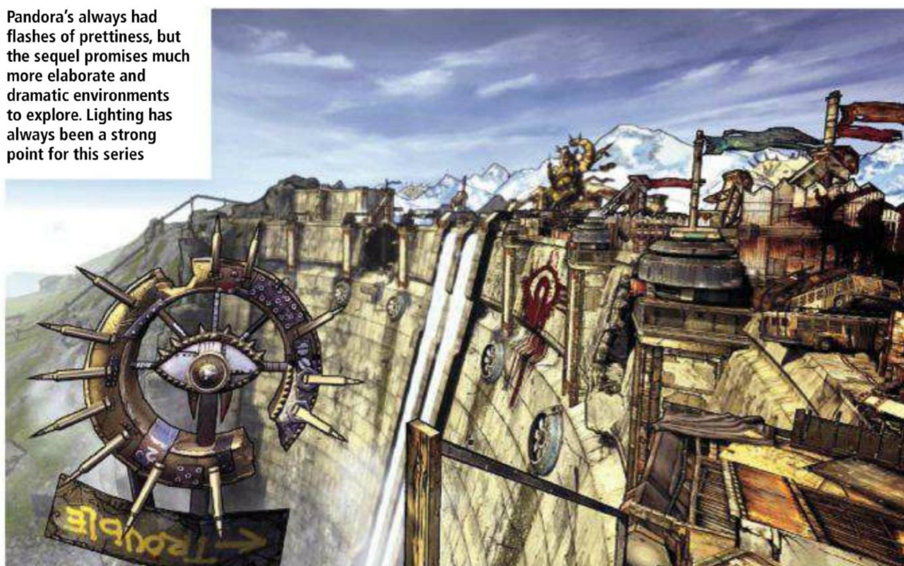


BORDERLANDS 2



We're going to miss our phasewalking days, but Maya's new, more offensive skillset means that players will have a decent reason to try out the new Siren character. Her phaselocking powers deliver focused bursts of damage, but leave you wide open to attack

will be fascinating to see how *Borderlands'* relatively straight-shooting encounter design deals with a character defined by agility.



Pandora's always had flashes of prettiness, but the sequel promises much more elaborate and dramatic environments to explore. Lighting has always been a strong point for this series

Outside of the classes, the tweaks that come with a sequel are a bit more traditional. "There are two main tiers of learning from the first game," Hellquist says. "One of the big things that we clearly learned is that fans wanted a richer storyline in their *Borderlands*. So that's something we've spent a lot of time on and put a lot of attention into. The other side is things that we wanted to do ourselves. That's environment variety, enemy variety, AI and things of that nature."

The team's new approach to story is impossible to judge at this point, although Gearbox's brilliant run of DLC suggests that it has a good handle on the kind of narratives that make sense in this quirky, hardscrabble world. "When we were developing the first game, we were more than halfway through when we discovered who we were and what the style of *Borderlands* was," Cooke reveals. "Very late in the development, one of our team, Mike Neumann, came online and said, 'Wow, we have this crazy, over-the-top gameplay – why don't we have crazy, over-the-top characters and wild situations to back that up?' That really tied into our DLC: better story, stronger characters all round. But the DLC had very, very short production times. With *Borderlands 2,* we're able to come back to that with a huge team and a lot of room to iterate. It's not just about one-off characters who live for a very short period of time. It's about connecting all of these characters to the world, and building a proper story out of that."

As for Gearbox's own wish list – more range when it comes to settings and battles – Hellquist admits that, alongside opening out environments and focusing on dynamic missions with objectives that can change, the team has been guided by the successes of the original. "We spent a lot of time looking at the first *Borderlands* and trying to evaluate where the really good stuff was," he explains, "and what parts of the systems were the things that created the interesting mixture that felt magic. Once we hit on those, we just found as many ways as possible to add to those areas. For example, our combat is a combination of the skills and the weapons you have, but it's also what the enemies are doing. In our style of gameplay, that often ends up being about targeting priority. We're not about high-end cover mechanics… It's about getting out there, getting your hands dirty, and identifying who is the biggest threat. We identified that quite quickly as a big part of why our combat feels so good.

"So our enemies this time around are doing a lot of things to adjust your target priority during the course of a fight. They have different behaviours now and different interactions with each other. Take our Hyperion robot enemies: you have your standard combat guys who are trying to kill you, then you have others that aren't attacking you, but are giving the other robots shields or repairing them. So some of the tactics players develop during the course of play get turned on their heads when they meet these new kinds of enemies.

"It should cause people to rethink their tactics and potentially pick different skills or use different gear as they move through the game." He laughs, his mind presumably spinning through four classes, 12 skill trees, and several million guns. "That should hopefully keep things fresh." ■







LEFT **Handsome Jack's almost Disney-esque in his villainy: slim, roguish and vain. A recognisable villain was one of the things that the first game most sorely lacked.**
RIGHT **Nomads bring a touch of the east to *Borderlands'* predominantly western designs. As ever, though, there's exaggeration to the body types and a focus on rugged, patchwork detailing.**
BELOW **Bandit weaponry is cheap and plentiful, but the art team has spent a lot of time making it appeal in a hacked-together way. Scopes are often made from bottles, and it's all covered in tape.**
BOTTOM **Nobody makes sci-fi designs look functional and oddly comic as well as Gearbox, as demonstrated by its hulking Battlebots**



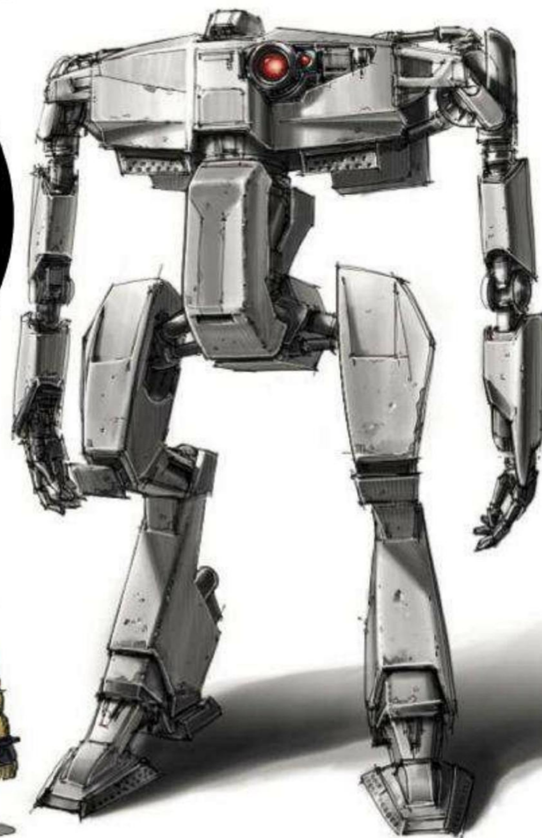


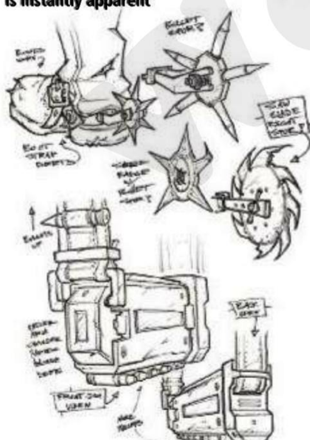
ABOVE **Zero, Axton and Maya are easy to tell apart from their silhouettes – a must for a fast-paced co-op game – and have the sharp detailing of action figures. Each one visually suggests a style of play, which is then backed up by the new skill trees.**
RIGHT **Tediore's guns are as cheap and nasty as it gets, and tend to explode when they're down to their last rounds. But that means you can use them as grenades.**
BELOW **Dwarf Salvador is *Borderlands 2*'s new heavy character, and his solidity is instantly apparent**



Design showcase

The first *Borderlands* was saved by an 11th-hour change of art style. Here's how the sequel is shaping up visually









Dragon's Dogma is filled with the sorts of swords and sorcery you'd expect of a western RPG, but fights are kinetic and frequently showcase over-the-top monsters – a reminder that this is a Capcom production

H | Y
P | E

DRAGON'S DOGMA

The heart of a hero goes AWOL in Capcom's action RPG

Publisher	Capcom
Developer	In-house
Format	360, PS3
Origin	Japan
Release	May



DRAGON'S DOGMA



RIGHT **You need to choose which pawns you populate your party with carefully. Take the wrong team into a fight, especially as a low-level beginner, and you'll soon be a crusader kebab**

What happens when an avant-garde action-game developer collides with the traditional roleplaying genre? The answer is *Dragon's Dogma*, an action-RPG with the mechanics of a fighter and the scale of an epic adventure.

The opening prologue is deceptive, pitting you and an NPC crew against a barrage of nasty foes in the dead of night, packed into tiny, cluttered environments. The hack-and-slash action feels weighty (a reminder that some of the team have *Devil May Cry* on their CVs), but the free camera, which is controlled by the right analogue stick, struggles to keep pace.

As a prologue, it's too dense with information and lore, overwhelming rather than welcoming newcomers to a world of swords, shields and goblins. Fortunately, it's also unrepresentative of the next few hours we spend with the game. After the title card, you're brought back to ground zero in a simple but deep character creation menu with which to forge your own hero or heroine. With your character and class sorted, it's time for a gloriously over-the-top cinematic to set up the premise for your hero's journey.

When your primitive seaside town of Cassardis is visited by a terrifying flame-red dragon, it's got one thing on its mind: stealing (and eating) your heart. Heart-deprived and with a killer headache, you embark on a quest for revenge, gathering 'pawns' (NPC sidekicks to flesh out your party) as you build towards a big showdown with the red menace. It's the sidequests that will steal much of your attention, however, and even in our limited preview they're a plentiful, joyous set of distractions that help to build you up from peasant to professional adventurer. They also give a sense of place as you interact with the many, varied citizens of your hometown and the neighbouring locales.

Outside the gates of Cassardis, we save a peddler in distress, and are rewarded with some choice items and a level upgrade. At a nearby encampment of soldiers preparing to give the big bad dragon a good kicking, we're given more backstory and a couple more pawns to choose from or create. Which pawns you can recruit depends on whether you can afford them, but you'll need to choose carefully to succeed.

The terrifying flame-red dragon has got one thing on its mind: eating your heart

When a cyclops then attacks the encampment, we're plunged back into the memory of the ghastly prologue, where the camera proves the true opponent. With oversized villains like this, the best tactic is to mount the monster with a tap of the right trigger and hack away at its stomping legs. It's a tricky fight that requires a couple of restarts, and some inconsistent collision detection adds to the difficulty. Soon after, we're plunged into yet another of these scripted showdowns with a towering, twisting hydra. Although greater in spectacle, hopefully this sort of heavily scripted set-piece is the exception to *Dogma*'s flow. It feels out of place in the game's inviting, relatively quiet open-world. The sense is that the developer is trying to shoehorn traditional boss scenarios into the mould of an RPG.

An escort mission through a goblin-infested mountain pass proves more dynamic, showing a compromise between scripted scenarios and your initiative has been struck at last. This builds to the game's second key location: the city of Gran Soren. A many-tiered, finely detailed castle, Soren is a world in a city, offering a multitude of quests, shops and characters. Quests can be prioritised manually for ease of navigation, playing into an overall level of accessibility that should make *Dogma* stand out for players who find themselves intimidated by sprawling time-sinks such as *Skyrim*, or deterred by subs-based titles such as *The Old Republic*. Yes, some will mourn the lack of true online play, but sharing your pawns with *Dogma*'s world of online players achieves a sense of community in the same way FromSoftware has done with the *Souls* series.

If the rest of *Dragon's Dogma* can unite the warring factions of the game's action inclinations and its RPG aims, it might well add up to a successful hybrid. ■



Do it for the people

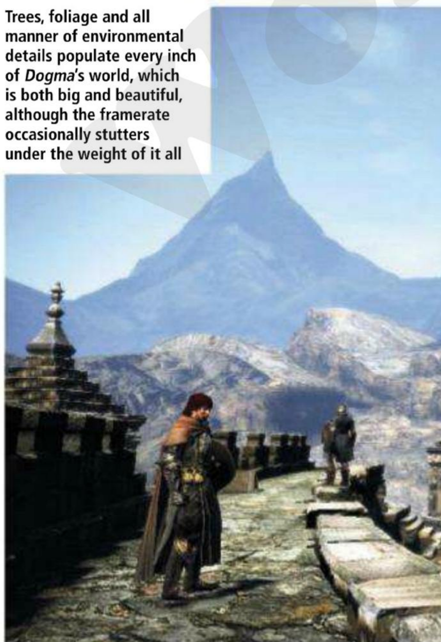
Our first quest involves a hunt for missing scriptures. We're after these manuscripts because the townsfolk are hungry for spiritual healing following the recent trauma. Refreshingly tied to the overarching story rather than tangential nonsense, it's a mission about the effect that the core narrative has had on the people peripheral to it. Your actions can also affect the locals' affinity for you, but quite how deep this light/dark morality system goes is yet to be revealed. This likability factor has hints of Lionhead's *Fable*, a game *Dragon's Dogma*, with its realtime combat, resembles as much as any of its MMO inspirations.

Dragon's Dogma has inherited the generous checkpoints of an action game, along with the weighty combat and physicality its developer has become known for





Trees, foliage and all manner of environmental details populate every inch of *Dogma*'s world, which is both big and beautiful, although the framerate occasionally stutters under the weight of it all





A day/night cycle adds to the sense of place, darkness bringing hordes of bandits and beasts out onto the trails. Meanwhile, rest and item management are thankfully offered by inns dotted around the map

H Y
P E

DEAD OR ALIVE 5

Team Ninja leaves behind the series' colourful past to keep it real

Publisher Tecmo Koei
Developer In-house (Team Ninja)
Format 360, PS3
Origin Japan
Release 2012

The girls are back in town, but Team Ninja's revised, more realist approach to its female cast members means it's less about their cup size and more about the sweat and tears they'll exhibit. Make no mistake, though: beautiful women are still a big part of *Dead Or Alive 5*





DEAD OR ALIVE 5

The cast control as you remember them and have dazzling new animations. The big change? Power Blows, which are capable of turning the tables of a fight as well as tipping the gradient of a stage



Before putting Hitomi, Ayane and company through their paces again, we have to ask why they've returned. After all, series creator Tomonobu Itagaki hailed *Dead Or Alive 4* as the 'definitive' entry for the beat 'em up that loves the ladies. "I myself was there at the time," Team Ninja's current head, **Yosuke Hayashi**, tells us. "Everyone on the team thought that *DOA4* was the end for the series, that *DOA4* was the finale. However, after all these years, five or six, we talked at the studio about how we can make a fighting game for the future, something that really pushes the fighting game format to the next level, and we found the answer to that."

That answer is what Hayashi refers to as 'fighting entertainment' – a fighter that looks and feels more realistic than any previous *DOA* and makes its stages an integral part of the experience. Characters sweat and pant, clothes and skin get scuffed with grit, and blazing sunshine has given way to the cold, crisp dead of night. Which isn't to say the game is any less beautiful than *DOA*s past– Team Ninja is famous for its ability to harness hardware horsepower, and its skill is evident in the advanced lighting effects, flawless framerate and sheer amount of background detail in our hands-on session.

The entertainment part of the equation comes into play when you connect with a 'Power Blow'. Charged by holding R1, Power Blows need to be timed to perfection. When executed successfully, they trigger an over-shoulder camera, which enables you to pivot your viewpoint to aim at (and highlight) a piece of background detail to send your opponent hurtling into with a tap of triangle. While smashing up the level is superficially satisfying, it's when we fire our foe into a suspended iron girder that things really get interesting. The rooftop begins to crumble and slide, and our fighters try to keep their composure as the floor beneath them slants farther towards a deathly drop. With another successful Power Blow, we target the far wall, which breaks the level's back, causing us to plummet to street level. We then pick up the action among the burning wreckage.

In our series of bouts, no two showdowns feel the same as the world around us crumbles

Interactive stages have been a series staple for a long time, but they've never been this extravagant. Rather than a gimmick, the ability to select from multiple destructible background details prevents it from wearing thin, and the fact that it's tied to the strategic, timed nature of Power Blows makes it a special unity of form and function.

Q&A
Yosuke Hayashi
Head of Team Ninja



There's a heightened sense of realism to *Dead Or Alive 5*. Why move away from a comic-book aesthetic?
The reason for the darker and more mature approach correlates with *Ninja Gaiden 3*. It's about going one step deeper. With *NG3*, it was about the consequence of killing, a man's actions... For *Dead Or Alive 5*, however, up to now we've had more of a comic-book feel, the proportions of the women were massive, more [like] pin-up images. What we want to do with *DOA5* is to explore mature themes in terms of female characters. [This time] it's about the beauty of the women – the inner beauty of the women, not just superficial DNA.

How will this inner beauty be conveyed?
It's not just that we wanted to express the inner workings of characters through story, but to convey a deeper sense of what makes a woman beautiful. This is something that is completely different to what we've done up to now. There's a completely different way of looking at a female counterpart in this game. We wanted to go into small detail... in terms of expressions of female characters. You'll see them angry, laughing, exhausted; you'll see all different forms of expression that show the inner workings of what they feel. For both male and female gamers, something will hit them. They'll say: 'That woman is deep, beautiful.'

With the realism of *Dead Or Alive 5*, the sense of actual combat, are you moving closer to a series such as *Virtua Fighter*?
Most of all, if we're talking about influences, we were making *NG3* and looking at it from an action game perspective – the blood and so on. We looked at *NG* and thought, 'How can we use some of these things in *DOA* – the dynamic actions, the [approach to] stages?' Right now, the *NG* and *DOA* teams are... talking to each other a lot. That was the basis. You mentioned *Virtua Fighter*, [which] is the forefather of the 3D genre – maybe on some level the team are subconsciously referencing that as creators. We're all like that.

What's your favourite past *DOA*?
For me, it's *DOA3*. That was the first title I worked on, starting out at Team Ninja. I came straight to Team Ninja after graduating, so that was my first title as a working man, so to speak. So when we finished the title and saw it on shelves around the world, people excited by it, buying it – the sensation of what we made [being] enjoyed by people. The passion [of fans] has been my driver ever since.



Know your enemy

Hayashi and his crew are keenly aware of the numerous competitors that *DOA5* will face when it hits the market, and are using many of them for research. "[We're looking at] every recent fighting game – and those throughout history," he explains. He's adamant, however, that *DOA5*'s approach is a fresh new direction for the genre: "We're adding a brand new layer that shows the way to the future of fighting games, the way they can and should evolve." Regardless of the new frills and thrills that have been added to this incarnation of the franchise, though, it feels familiar enough – in its movesets and sense of weight and power – to conjure a distinct sense of nostalgia for the series' prior iterations.

Although you can choose a 'classic' fixed camera, it's the cinematic motion of the new standard camera – which zooms in to frame crunching kicks – that better suits the dynamic action of *DOA5*

Team Ninja's new direction is in part a reaction to the current stagnation of the genre. "Fighting games right now, they're huge, huge in the industry," says Hayashi. "But every one you kind of look at, everything feels static. The characters are moving, but the backgrounds, the backdrops, are just there for the sake of visual beauty. That's it. With *DOA5*, everything moves dynamically... We've been all about the stages in the *Dead Or Alive* series up to now as well, so we've had more focus on stages than any other fighting game. We really wanted to push that much, much further." Quite how dynamic the destruction is hasn't yet been divulged, but in our series of bouts no two showdowns feel the same as the world around us crumbles and falls.

It may have a bombastic, all-action approach to its environments, but *DOA5* is occupied by the most realistic looking – and realistically proportioned – cast in its history. This is comic-book action through a real-world filter. Hayashi is also bearing in mind the changing face of an audience that may no longer be enamoured with comic aesthetics.

DOA5, then, represents a bold artistic divergence from the current trend of colourful beat 'em ups and also a new slant on old characters. And it, perhaps even more than poster child *Ninja Gaiden 3*, is emblematic of Team Ninja's life after Itagaki. But for a moment, Hayashi can't help but channel his ex-boss: "The thing is, when you look at [other] titles, you'd find it difficult – as a mature, male gamer, for example – to look at those characters and fall in love with them at first glance. Creating a beautiful woman that a mature user would look at and say, 'Wow, she's fantastic,' is what we wanted to do." The student really has become the master. ■



www.bit.ly/wtWGlj
Screenshot gallery

The hi-tech warriors of *ShootMania* don't rely on guns in the conventional sense, instead firing slow-moving bolts of energy by default. This makes long-range gunplay a different proposition to your standard shooter, but easy to follow

HYPE

SHOOTMANIA STORM

TrackMania's DIY game-building principles come to the FPS

Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Nadeo
Format	PC
Origin	France
Release	2012



Spectating is a huge part of the *ShootMania* concept, and Castelnerac believes it might be the only aspect of the game to make it to consoles. The top-down camera is excellent, while player models wear their health on their backs to make the action more readable to an audience

Nadeo's **Florent Castelnerac** will be explaining the basics of the *Mania* series long after he draws his first pension. Wrapping up our introduction to *ShootMania*, the FPS flavour of the build-your-own franchise, he asks the assembled journalists for questions. Sure enough, the staples come out. "What are Planets, exactly? A virtual currency?" asks one. "Is the [level] editor a separate application you can download?" inquires another. The Nadeo boss answers with all the patience of a man who's been doing this for almost a decade.

His answers will be familiar to anyone who has played any of the many *TrackMania* games, though. These racers are supposed to be games that make the world feel very small; their users zig between time zones and zag across hemispheres with almost every click of the mouse. Their 'Planets' currency (formerly Coppers) flows as quickly as the supply of user-generated content: cars, tracks, casinos and whatever else can be built or scripted. *ShootMania* merely applies these principles of community-driven customisability to the FPS.

And this is effectively the third time that *ShootMania Storm* has been announced (Storm being the environmental theme, much like *TrackMania*'s Canyon or Valley). The first was several years ago, when Nadeo spilled the beans with in-game adverts for creation kits for *TrackMania 2* (racing), *ShootMania* (FPS) and *QuestMania* (RPG). We covered it again last year, but now Ubisoft's made up its mind that this is the *official* debut.

ShootMania is an even closer match to *TrackMania* than you might think. Integrated into Nadeo's new ManiaPlanet 'operating system', it uses the same level-building interface and many of the same building blocks as its petrolhead sibling. Boasting the same almost-seamless mix of game and browser, it wants nothing less than to be the YouTube of shooters.

Jumping into an early map, what hits us like a railgun is the influence of Quake III

Jumping into one of Nadeo's early maps, BattleArena_Boulevard, what hits us like a railgun is the influence of *Quake III Arena*. That kind of abstract twitch gameplay is very much the kernel of 'default' *ShootMania*, albeit with the edges softened somewhat. Groomed for e-sports and all its sensitivities, the game's character models are circa-1990s cyber-warriors, and its 'bullets' spectacular bursts of fluorescent tracer. There are no gun models at all. No one bleeds or explodes.



www.bit.ly/zDaEDc
Screenshot gallery



SHOOTMANIA STORM



To list the ways in which energy poles could be linked to generators, turrets, events and behaviours would be to drastically understate the potential of Nadeo's scripting engine. Even by *TrackMania* standards, the possibilities here seem almost endless

Battle Arena is essentially an assault gametype where the opposing red and blue teams have to seize each other's command posts. Stand next to your opponents' energy pole and you'll initiate a countdown that can't be reversed, meaning that points are captured quickly. Being a *Mania* game, the maps are made up of user-configurable blocks supplied by Nadeo, some of which have specific behaviours. In this case, halfway between the command points are gantries made of 'rail blocks'. Standing on one gives you a railgun that rewards supreme accuracy with one-hit kills. Step off and the railgun disappears.



Storm's terrain isn't a huge departure from *TrackMania 2 Canyon*'s, though it mixes in the arcane symbols of an FPS deathmatch. More is to come after *TrackMania*'s *Valley* expansion is done

The game also reinstates the *Quake III* habit of mapping jump to the right mouse button and using the space bar for player chat, although that did mean we spent the best part of two hours trying to talk our way out of being shot in the face. Holding the right mouse button, meanwhile, is essentially a 'stamina' action and makes you run.

After that, things get weird. The default weapon in *ShootMania* fires up to four bursts of energy before it has to slowly recharge. Each of those bursts moves at FPS rocket speed – slow enough that you can follow its progress across the map. Unless you're standing on a rail block, this reduces all long-range tactics to a kind of sputtering spray-and-pray. Dodging incoming fire merely means spotting it and stepping out of the way.

While this seems to stifle command-post camping and encourage close-range duels, it also gives railgun campers the chance to utterly eviscerate those trying to dislodge them. Plus it means, at least at first, you'll spend most of your time with an empty clip, dancing about an opponent in much the same state. Some of the more experienced players on our server comfortably dominate proceedings, and it's hard to know if they're mastering or exploiting the system.

"It's like *TrackMania*," Castelnerac notes. "That game has 120 core function parameters, so I need to understand them, know them well, and find a balance. And this is [true] with *ShootMania*. You have four or five movement models, for example, with parameters and so on, and we go through them. At the moment, we have it so you can run on the ground, but I think I will remove that. It's really a little too fast and the jumping is too big."

It's hard to say whether the time we spend with this and other maps, some of which introduce 'arrows' (more like mortar bombs) and one-on-one battles, is particularly



Building blocks

When Castelnerac presents *ShootMania*'s editor, he spends much of his time distracted by talk of *Tetris* and games of hide-and-seek, designed to lure in players "without skill, just ideas". The former is a fully featured game integrated using ManiaScript, and can be summoned anywhere in the ManiaPlanet interface. You could play it while building a deathmatch, for example, and post your scores to a Facebook-style wall. Furthermore, "we want it so that in the script, in one line, you can say that when 'score=1' it saves to the cloud system," says Castelnerac. "So you could quit your game of *Tetris* at work and carry on at home."



TrackMania 2 now has an official wiki, which Nadeo Live has mapped to various help buttons in the game's UI. *ShootMania*, an altogether more complex and untested scenario, will require nothing less



enjoyable. Most of it is spent learning the rules and geographies of matches that last minutes. This, you have to assume, is what the YouTube of shooting is partly going to involve: a quick download, a quick play, and an undercurrent of being a bit overwhelmed.

Perhaps if *TrackMania* was better understood by the world at large, *ShootMania* could more comfortably let its title do the talking. But like its namesake, the game is what its players make it, and the YouTube model is just one of countless options.

ManiaScript is where all the real brainstorming tends to happen, and it looks certain to come to the fore in *ShootMania*, because of its increased flexibility. One obvious route is the video wall objects dotted around the maps. To look at them is to turn the crosshair into a mouse pointer, and what happens next could be anything. They could be an interactive playbook, for instance, which a team can scribble on; adverts for dedicated servers; or switches to activate turrets.

It's here, as always with Nadeo, that things begin to race, including our thoughts. And publishers have always struggled to keep up, failing to moderate the onslaught of innovations players can generate. This, it's hoped, is where Nadeo Live will step in. A bigger and more formal version of Nadeo's old satellite studio, its role is to deliver not just enough content to drive the ManiaPlanet community, but the vital documentation *TrackMania 2 Canyon* so lacked on release.

Castelnerac explains: "It's an old story. I've had people in training for three years to go in that unit: engineers. But in the last year they've had more experience, and more understanding from the publisher, so it's all more straightforward."

Q&A
Florent Castelnerac
CEO, Nadeo



What kind of audience are you expecting to get into *ShootMania*?
The way I see gaming, you have this core of 'videogames' and then some specific tastes around it: 'genres'. I feel that *ShootMania*, like *TrackMania*, is more in that centre of videogames. We had the world champion of *Counter-Strike* come to the office, and he said, "Oh, I don't think GO [*Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*] is going to make it, so I think I'll play *DOTA 2*". And another one was, "I was champion of *Quake*, but now I play *StarCraft*." These are gamers' games, and people go from *League Of Legends* to *Skyrim* to any popular new genre. Do people play military games because they like the military taste, or because they're popular videogames? So I expect gamers. But I expect the community will be more about battle – more aggressive, somehow. My former publisher said that with World War II games you have to ban the avatars in forums, because it's too troublesome. *TrackMania*'s like the Care Bear in comparison.

Why are you still having to explain the basics of *TrackMania* to people?
We made videos with our former publisher in 2006. Five videos to explain: these are the Coppers [Planets in the game's updated terminology], these are the ManiaLinks… And nobody watched them! Nobody wants to watch a documentary. So we make the game as simple as possible. But since the game is really big, it's like an adventure game – you have discover it little by little. We're doing a tutorial in many languages, but I think *ShootMania* will provide more power to let things organise themselves.

Given your focus on user content, are you worried about SOPA and its ilk?
We don't host stuff at all, so we're a step further from it than YouTube, Facebook, etc. So, as a company, I'm not worried at all. Looking at SOPA, I'd say I'm worried about the differences of understanding on both sides. No one is capable of talking to each other, and they have to go to war to make a point. It's sad, because you know that both sides are wrong in certain ways. The Internet has to grow. We've spent five or six years thinking about copyright. We like it [in some respects] – giving credit to the people who create is very important. We think of ManiaPlanet maybe like a social laboratory: how do you invite creators to deal with each other? And it's easier for us, because you have only one player of the data, one system. So we can maybe show how it can work.

H|Y
P|E

TRIALS EVOLUTION

Trials HD's follow-up is a sea change, not just an oil change

Publisher	TBA
Developer	RedLynx
Format	360
Origin	Finland
Release	2012

Just one of the many lavish improvements that's being rolled out in *Trials Evolution* is the vastly improved suite of character customisation tools. Players will have far greater control over the look of both rider and bike. Don't expect to buy any buffs for a competitive advantage, however



We've become accustomed to incremental fine-tuning in game sequels. To borrow the naming convention of Apple's iPhone hardware updates, most sequels could easily use the name of the original game and simply tack an 'S' on the end. Studios might introduce a new type of shotgun, or perhaps an enemy that's a bit taller. And if On The Origin Of Species has taught us anything, it's that evolution happens imperceptibly over massive stretches of time. Well, RedLynx obviously failed to get Darwin's memo.

Trials Evolution dramatically pushes back the walls of the *Trials* experience – literally. The dingy warehouse walls that hemmed in many of the sadistic obstacle courses populating *Trials HD* have been toppled, revealing natural terrain and wide-open vistas. Instead of just peppering the track with crates of dynamite, the watch word in *Evolution* is dynamism. So waves batter and splash over a dam as you gun your motorbike across its crumbling lip. A military bombardment explodes around you as your bike hops between Czech hedgehogs like some bizarro-world take on WWII's Normandy Invasion.

One aspect of the game that's been significantly overhauled is the level editor,



www.bit.ly/xCwvYz
Screenshot gallery

Moving the action outside the dingy, eerily lit interiors of *Trials HD* lends *Evolution* a much more dramatic scope. Depth of scene adds to the sense of place



Outlandish jumps such as this one illustrate RedLynx's penchant for weaving humour and absurdity into the *Trials* experience



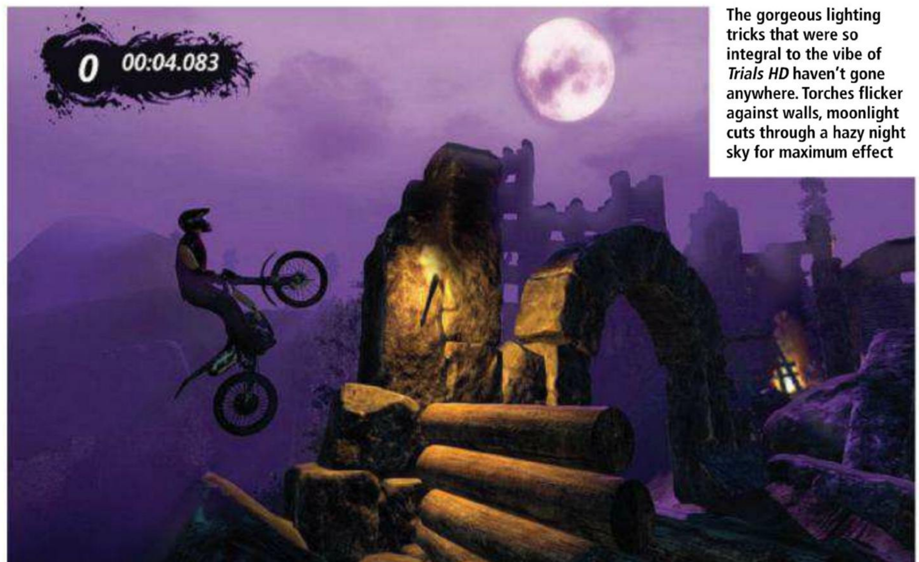
TRIALS EVOLUTION



In a departure from the rigid left-to-right progression of *Trials HD*, *Evolution* introduces courses that bend as you pass through them. This allows for some clever track design, such as this baseball diamond

which expands the creative possibilities far beyond mere track creation. There's a decent chance Media Molecule will see a noticeable uptake in sales, given how many *LittleBigPlanet* references are destined to feature in previews such as this one.

"We wanted to improve every facet of the game in *Trials Evolution*," says **Antti Ilvessuo**, RedLynx's creative director. "And the editor was something we felt was a huge part of the appeal of *Trials HD*, and there was plenty of room to expand it. We had many ideas internally; one of our programmers and one of our graphic guys came up with the new open-world system. So we saw the Evo Editor as one area where we could really put an amazing amount of power in the player's hands."



The gorgeous lighting tricks that were so integral to the vibe of *Trials HD* haven't gone anywhere. Torches flicker against walls, moonlight cuts through a hazy night sky for maximum effect

It's a humbling reality check when you discover that all the tracks in *Trials Evolution* were made with the same powerful track editor that ships with the game. RedLynx's level designers use a 360 controller, just like the rest of the unwashed masses, which provides added incentive to make the interface user-friendly. One of *Evolution*'s recent trailers even depicts a few seconds of an FPS, which RedLynx level designer Lee Rowland put together to show what's possible now that you can unfix the camera and assign it to trail a different 'player object' than the standard rider. How do you design a UI for these tools that makes them accessible yet retains the complexity necessary to get that opening level of *Super Mario Bros* just right?

"We just tried to think hard about how to show different things," says Ilvessuo, "and we also knew from using the editor a lot what were the most common things, the things you use all the time, so [we tried to] make those easier to get to. We also rely on the user to some extent, in that they'll need to be brave and dive right in. But for those who just want to have some light fun making some cool tracks, the lite version of the editor is really easy to use."

With every part of the *Trials* experience getting buffed up in such remarkable fashion, it's reassuring to know that the core of the experience will remain mostly untouched. After all, RedLynx's bike physics is the closest thing gaming has to Coke's enigmatic syrup recipe. "We updated it somewhat," says Ilvessuo, "so the physics feels a lot smoother, but basically it's the same *Trials* games with the real *Trials* kind of physics. We did not want to break the game, but rather keep what was already working perfectly." ■



Hot wheels

Evolution's new online multiplayer, which accommodates as many as four riders, offers competitive fans a more immediately satisfying alternative to the standard leaderboard leapfrogging. "With the addition of multiplayer," says Ilvessuo, "you no longer have to wait to see who is really the best, or at least the best player that day. It's truly a different style of racing, where you can see that your friends are really close by – like one metre away. Suddenly you start to ride differently. It's a different style of racing, but fun! It's head-to-head whenever you want, and we can't wait to see how intense the competition gets."







LEFT **The base character model has 17 bones, and the average in-game model has 5-8K triangles in it. Almost 60 unique character gear models were created.**
ABOVE + RIGHT **The game features more than 1,500 objects, all of which are exposed to would-be game designers through the versatile track editor**



RIGHT ***Evolution*'s outdoor environments are not discrete elements, but are set in a 2x4km virtual county, allowing users to lay tracks anywhere within the micro-world**





Design showcase

Trials Evolution's phenomenal editor puts professional-level game-design tools in the hands of Xbox Live Arcade users





ABOVE **The track editor uses building 'seeds' for rapid urban renewal – or destruction. You can even set your new tracks entirely indoors to emulate the classic *Trials HD* feel.**
LEFT **All of the outfit sets were digitally sculpted using millions of polygons each**



HYPE

SLEEPING DOGS

United Front Games' open-world revival shows off its new tricks

Publisher	Square Enix
Developer	United Front Games
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	Canada
Release	Summer

Delays, layoffs and studio closures seem almost par for the course in game development these days, but even so United Front Games has been through the ringer. Its forthcoming title, *Sleeping Dogs* (formerly known as *True Crime: Hong Kong*), was presumed dead as of last summer. Under the control of Activision, the game was cancelled, the label's CEO **Eric Hirshberg** declaring: "It had been delayed twice, the budget had been increased twice, and it had ballooned to a size where it was going to have to be a pretty incredible success in order to be worth the investment that it was taking to get it done. The finished product was not going to be at the top of that genre."

Seeing the game revealed in its new guise – presented atop a huge floating restaurant in its Hong Kong setting, just to immerse the journalistic pack in attendance as much as possible – it's easy to see the truth in what he said. And yet also completely disagree with the decision. Whether you call it *True Crime, Sleeping Dogs, Napping Marmosets* or anything else you care to think of, this game won't sell the units to topple sandbox giants like *GTA* or *Red Dead Redemption*. But then it was never going to. However, it most definitely has enough qualities of its own to merit release, and to stay competitive with games like *Saints Row* in the second tier of the genre.

So we're thankful that Square Enix – which bought the rights to the game, but not the name – is taking the project through to completion, and a hands-on session has given us a good indication of what we can expect come the release this summer.

It's very much classic open-world fare: you'd know what most of the mini-map icons mean and what each button is likely to do without ever being told. But the gameplay staples have, by and large, been tweaked and refined to make the pad-in-hand experience feel sufficiently fresh.

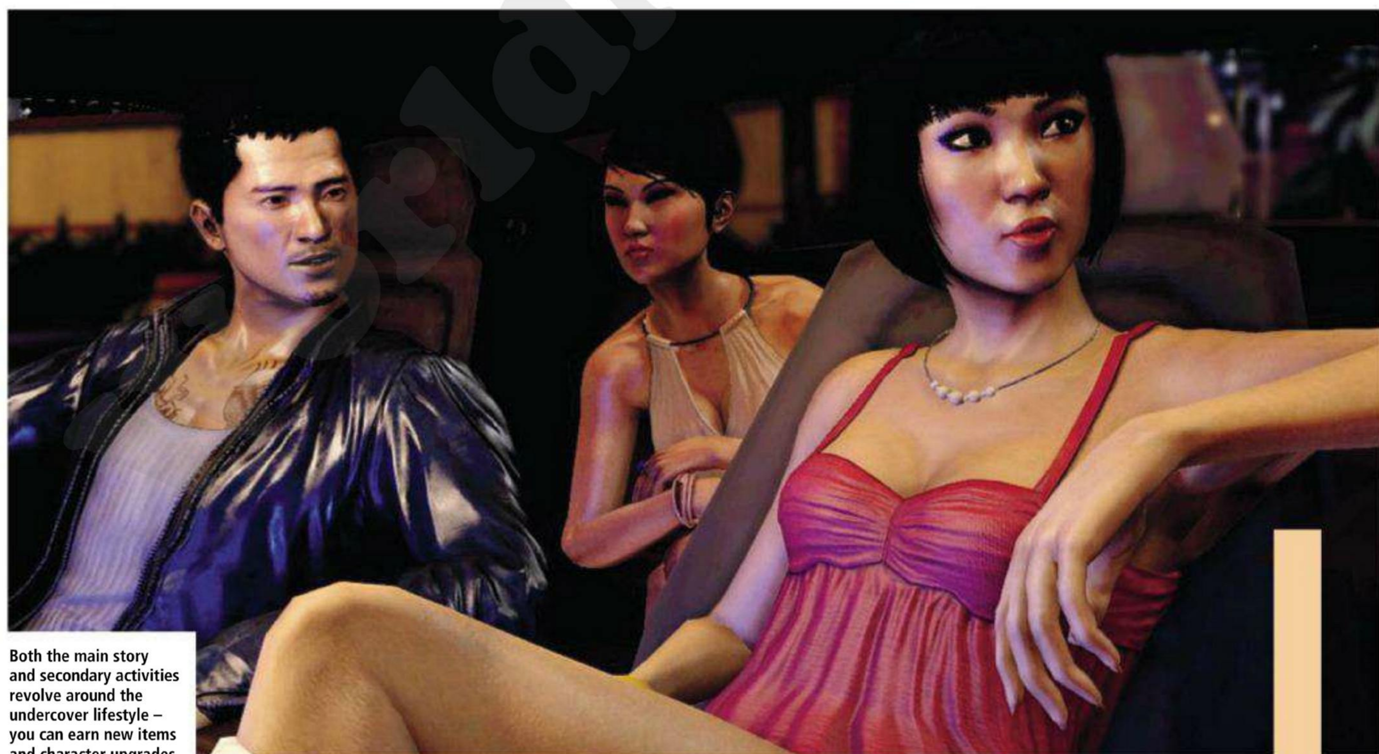
The violence is shocking, but it does help achieve the desired gritty, adult tone

Under your control is detective Wei Shen, an officer in the Hong Kong police force tasked with going deep undercover into an organisation within the Triads. Story-wise we're promised that this will mean tough moral choices, gritty realism and a varied cast of characters, but what it definitely does mean is a large amount of driving fast cars, shooting big guns, and punching men very hard in the face. And it's that punching that's most distinctive. Being set in a country that's the home of martial arts cinema, hand-to-hand combat was always going to be a crucial aspect to get right, and this is a step up from most other open-world games. Evidently taking its lead from *Arkham City*, it's centred on combos and environmental interaction. Although Shen isn't as agile as Batman (there's no leaping 15ft across the screen from one attack from the other), he's definitely got skills, and light and heavy punches and kicks can be chained together to take down multiple enemies. Plus, when they attack an icon flashes above their heads letting you know when to tap triangle/Y to counter. Like we said: familiar. It's not quite as snappy or responsive as Rocksteady's efforts, but six months out from release it's holding up well.

Additionally, Shen clearly doesn't share the Dark Knight's strict moral code, so goons can be finished off in a huge number of brutal and bloody ways. Grab an enemy and a variety of objects in any given environment glow red. Drag him over to one and you'll be able to slice his face off in a fan, smash his head in an oven, impale him on a lead pipe, set him on fire using a cooker, and apparently dozens more variations on this theme. The violence is slightly shocking, but it does help achieve the desired gritty, adult tone.

During a foot chase through busy streets we also got to test the game's free-running

The melee combat borrows heavily from the *Arkham* titles, but it's a far more bloody and brutal affair. There's lots of environmental interactivity, too



Both the main story and secondary activities revolve around the undercover lifestyle – you can earn new items and character upgrades



Like any urban open-world game, there are car chases aplenty. United Front Games says that its reference material, which heavily featured Hong Kong action films, was the biggest influence on the game



system: a sort of *Assassin's Creed*-lite affair that allows you to vault over or slide under obstacles as you move across terrain. It's not hugely interactive, but it does make navigating the environment a smoother and more enjoyable experience than in most sandboxes, and along with some nifty camera angles it most definitely adds to the cinematic feel United Front Games is aiming for.

The driving model, which we sample during a nighttime street race, still needs work, however. Momentum currently feels a little unrefined, preventing you from being able to drift properly. But with the remaining development time being devoted to polish, as opposed to creation, this could yet be addressed by the time of release.

As a climax, we play a mission from towards the game's conclusion. In it, Shen is being tortured in a mid-construction high-rise and has to be guided, half-dead, to an escape. Again, the influence is clear, with the camera work bringing to mind the previous two *Uncharted* games, and a raging storm outside along with some more stealthy takedowns combining to create a tense and dramatic atmosphere.

As with all open-world games, the strength of *Sleeping Dogs'* narrative and its ability to elicit investment in the characters is what will determine its success; whether it's an emotional 40-hour epic such as *Red Dead Redemption*, or a three-hour tear-about curio such as *Saints Row*. The team is obviously aiming for the former, citing Hong Kong crime-flick Infernal Affairs and its Martin Scorsese remake The Departed as the major influences, so the intentions are good.

If these can be delivered on then, with enjoyable and well-developed core mechanics already in place, Activision may yet be made to see the error of its ways. ■



A tale of one city

Hong Kong, where the game was first revealed as *Sleeping Dogs*, is the game's star, and design director **Mike Skupa** says the virtual recreation is the result of extensive research: "The density is one of the first things we looked at, and the verticality. We took a lot of elements of the city: the characters, the honesty of the advertising, the hustle and bustle, the neon – there's a very unique look to it. Designing our mechanics around Hong Kong gave us the opportunity to differentiate the game, and we didn't have to modify it to accommodate gameplay mechanics." The region has never featured in an open-world game before.

Q&A
Mike Skupa
Design director, United Front Games

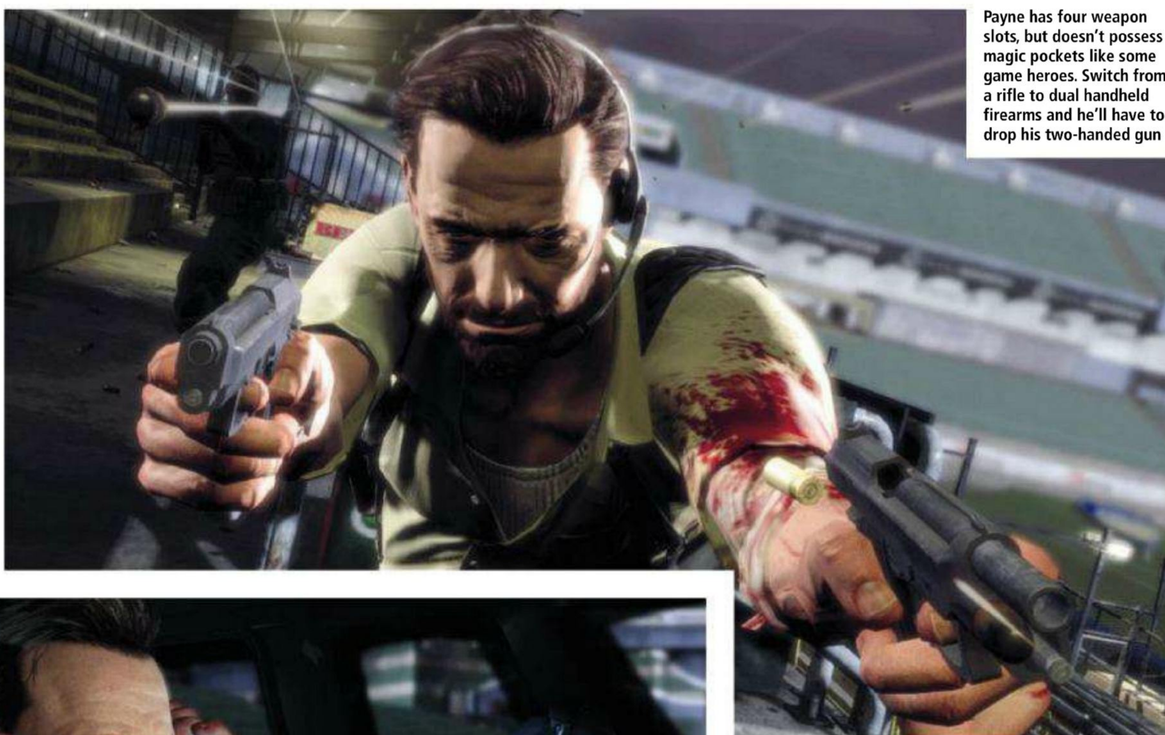


The game's been through a fairly storied development: what difficulties, or even benefits, has that had?
Well, it gave us a chance to step back and look at the project as a whole, especially considering how large the game is, and I think the relationship with Square and the experience they have is very similar to our vision of the game. So that gave us the ability to speak shorthand and really figure out what was the core essence of the game, and what we needed to focus on to really make it shine.

And what were the things that needed the most attention?
Obviously the combat system is a big part of it, as are the police aspects – making sure we had enough elements to support the core storyline and to support Wei Shen's journey and the fact that he is a cop. And then we trimmed some extraneous aspects and just put some extra resources into selling the things that will bring people to play this title over other games in the genre.

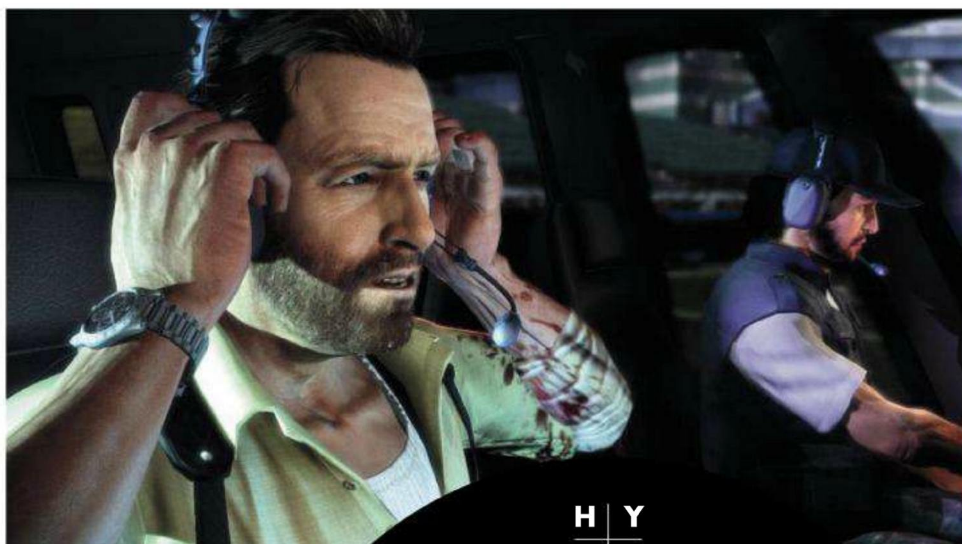
The combat is clearly heavily influenced by the *Arkham* games, right?
We've been heavily influenced by a lot of combat-orientated games, and one thing we really want to make sure happen is that it's accessible to people who play open-world games, but not necessarily combat-heavy games. We want to make sure the game caters to anyone who picks up the controller and wants to feel like a martial arts star, so we've focused on the simplicity of the controls and the gameplay, and also giving the player a lot of new things they can't do in other games, such as the big focus on the environment. Also, because this is a gritty, urban Triad story, we felt we could separate ourselves from superhero-style games by upping the violence a notch, which helps show the intensity and danger the character's going through.

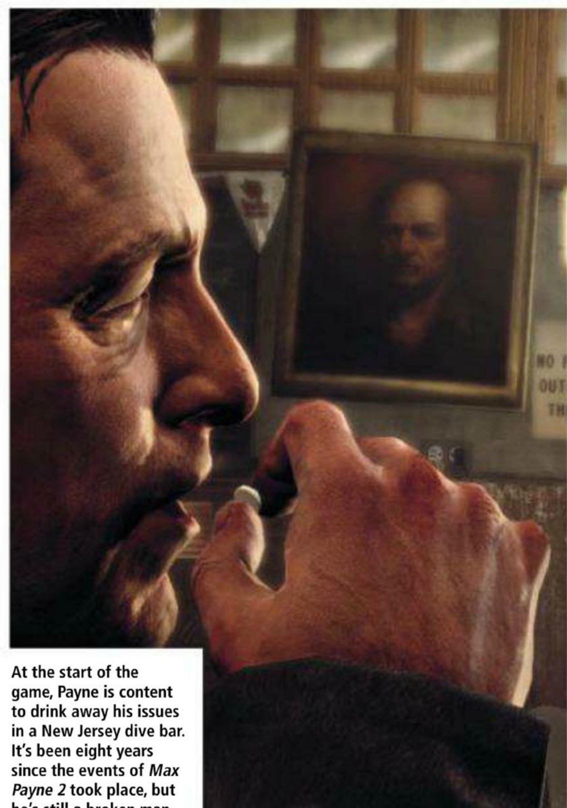
The spectrum of open-world games is huge, ranging from *GTAIV* to *Saints Row: The Third*, but what part of the market are you aiming for?
We're aiming for something fairly mature, fairly gritty, but also the fact this is a crime story set in Hong Kong means we looked at that concept, and the core foundations of the game, and we used that as our blueprint – we tried to make it as authentic as possible. We did a lot of research into Hong Kong, the Triads and the police. It's a lot easier for us to base it on reality as much as possible, while also using the over-the-top action elements that you see in Hong Kong cinema.



Payne has four weapon slots, but doesn't possess magic pockets like some game heroes. Switch from a rifle to dual handheld firearms and he'll have to drop his two-handed gun

BELOW **Raul Passos acts as Payne's partner in Sao Paolo. The men know each other from their academy days back in the US, and it was Passos who secured Payne a new role as familial bodyguard**





At the start of the game, Payne is content to drink away his issues in a New Jersey dive bar. It's been eight years since the events of *Max Payne 2* took place, but he's still a broken man

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MAX PAYNE 3

Slumming it with Max in a mid-game favela mission

Publisher	Rockstar
Developer	In-house
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	Canada, UK, US
Release	May



www.bit.ly/yH4oHq
Screenshot gallery

Max Payne has been chewed up and spat out by New York twice already. His life was systematically picked apart and smashed in the first of the games to bear his name, before being partially rebuilt and smashed all over again in the second. So it comes as no surprise that the city that plays host to the third *Max Payne* game, Brazil's Sao Paolo, is just as keen to crush the put-upon ex-cop in its concrete maw.

Already beaten down and broken up at the start of the game, a series of nebulous events – Rockstar is keeping quiet on specifics – have dragged him closer to the end of his already-frayed rope. Payne is in Brazil working as a bodyguard alongside an old cop buddy, a supposedly simple job that goes south when the mark's wife gets kidnapped. Exploring various leads about the suspects draws Payne further into the Brazilian underworld, with tendrils from paramilitary groups, crooked cops and favela gangs all snaking around the game's storyline.



A click of the right stick lets Payne access his bullet-time ability without diving. But bullet-time isn't infinite: Payne has to kill to refill his gauge

The eye for the cinematic is more carefully honed than in previous Max Paynes

It's this last group that presents the most obvious danger as we join Payne two-thirds of the way into his latest tale. He's in trouble once again, somehow finding himself on the edge of one of the city's shanty towns. He's soon mugged for his money, weapons, and the remaining shred of his dignity. Worse, the latter has already been ravaged by an apparent psychological blip that's caused him to shave his head and purchase perhaps the world's most heinous Hawaiian shirt.

Oddly, it's not long before the locals catch a whiff of the hulking, bald American stalking their favela, and bristle at his presence. Bristle with automatic weaponry, that is. Payne is challenged in a backroom nightclub by a local tough, necessitating the use of lethal force. Fortunately, even for an older man – eight years have passed since *Max Payne 2* – he can still move supernaturally well. Tapping our 360 controller's right bumper sends him into one of the series' trademark 'shoot-dodges' – a flying leap in the player's chosen direction that both slows down in-game time and allows Payne to line up shots on his leisurely ride towards the ground. Click the right stick and you'll be treated to the same slow-motion effect without the jump.

With the nightclub's denizens getting increasingly aggressive, Payne is forced to employ both time-bending tactics to survive. Launching forward, there's a convenient table to hide behind. In another shooter, this table would serve as a temporary residence for the player until the room was cleared. Payne's enemies have no truck with such tactics, and immediately try to flush him out into the open. He's more powerful out there anyway, given space to hurtle around and play the angles – after all, one shoot-dodge can reward you with upwards of four headshots.

Payne's move from Remedy to become an in-house-developed property at Rockstar sees the third game's eye for the cinematic more carefully honed than before. Kill-cams and bullet time offer small moments of filmic glory, but the biggest set-pieces are saved for one-offs. After battling his way through the favela, Payne blunders into a gang's safehouse. Quickly busted, he improvises by grabbing a chain and dislodging a counterweight before shooting upwards. Once all this action has played out, the player's then rewarded with a ten-second-long slow-mo shooting gallery.

This section epitomises what we've seen of *Max Payne 3* so far. Yes, the game appears to have much in common with 2003's *Max Payne 2*, but it is difficult to quibble when the results feel this good. ■



Bullet time

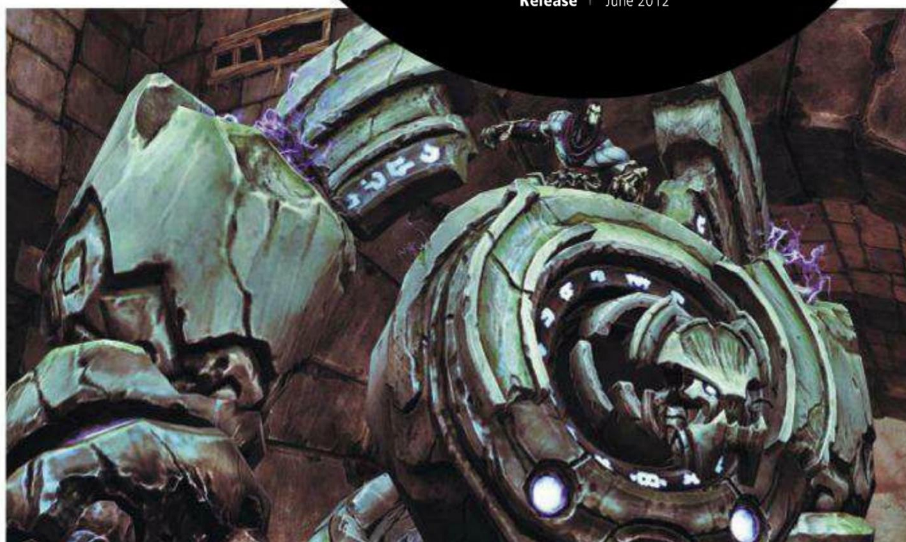
Max Payne 3's headshots are their own reward. The game's bullets are powerful, punchy things that are quick to snap extremities back and spray blood and flesh across the makeshift walls of the favela. Their palpable sense of speed and lethality is particularly obvious in the game's kill-cam, which is deployed when Payne offs the final enemy in a wave. Hold the trigger as the game's view switches to a slow-motion close-up of the dying foe and an unseen Payne will continue to pump round after round into their twitching body, sending it skittering around the floor like a nervous spider.

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DARKSIDERS II

Why Death is just the beginning for Vigil's post-apocalyptic yarn

Publisher	THQ
Developer	Vigil Games
Format	360, PC, PS3, Wii U
Origin	US
Release	June 2012





With his vambraces and body straps, THQ's Death invites comparison with Ubisoft's Prince, many of whose traits have been borrowed for *Darksiders II*

ABOVE **Dungeon-specific vehicular constructs are adequately equipped to handle combat, but their main purpose is to help Death cross lava pools and bridge gaps (by way of extendable arms) that he otherwise wouldn't be able to manage**



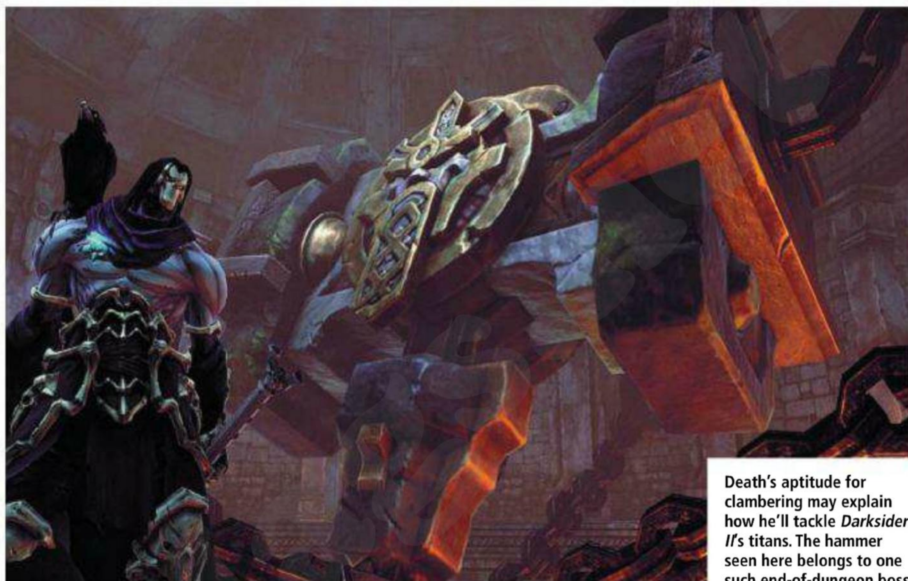


www.bit.ly/AApXGX
Screenshot gallery

While the first *Darksiders* wasn't quite deserving of the '*Zelda* for adults' description some fans insisted on branding it with, the similarities between Vigil's tale of post-apocalyptic clean-up and Nintendo's evergreen heroics were too striking to ignore. *Darksiders'* hub-based world, forged from gear-gated districts and familiar dungeon archetypes, followed Hyrule's template in all but aesthetics. In snivelling companion The Watcher, the game's protagonist, War, even had his very own Navi to cold shoulder. And what was his steed, Ruin, if not a fiery Epona used to traverse the Hyrule Field and Gerudo Valley of Earth's Scalding Gallow and Ashlands?

Darksiders II neither abandons this template nor feels content to be bound by it, bursting eagerly out of the *Zelda* pigeonhole by broadening its influences. Set during War's quiescent 100-year imprisonment in the first game, *Darksiders II* swings the spotlight on to fellow horseman Death, and in so doing breathes new potential into a series already boasting a staunchly loyal following.

Although Death's destined to roam a world pieced together using the same level-design philosophies as War's stomping grounds, a more slender profile lets him do so with elegance. When faced with bottomless pits, War was only brave enough to shimmy across cracked walls. Death's lithe approach involves wall running across solid surfaces, with bulwarks only serving to extend his defiance of gravity, thanks to button-prompt-powered vaults similar to those seen in 2008's *Prince Of Persia*. Rooms constructed from naught but pillars and posts won't be able to halt Death and his locomotive intricacies, while narrow hallways and smoke shafts are the ideal apparatus for wall bouncing and jumping.



Death's aptitude for clambering may explain how he'll tackle *Darksiders II*'s titans. The hammer seen here belongs to one such end-of-dungeon boss

All the while, Death's eidolic nature is the perfect excuse for more frequent visits to unearthly realms. These will be microcosms of unbridled fantasy, designed to let creative director Joe Madureira tap into the comic-book sensibilities that made his name as an artist in the '90s. Vigil is keen not to replicate the muted environs of *Darksiders'* relatively insipid opening, and Death's plane-walking skills are a great pretext to ditch them.

Earth hasn't been abandoned, meanwhile, and is faced with a new threat in the shape of corruption crystals. These unnatural growths have blighted the land and continue to spread, and Vigil promises the glassy affliction will play an integral role in Death's story. No doubt part of that tale will involve the growth of crystalline clusters that are prominently displayed on its protagonist's chest.

If Death is indeed suffering, though, he's not showing it, especially when it comes to combat. In a fitting twist, he takes pugilistic cues from Dante – not Alighieri of *Dante's Inferno* fame (while Death possesses a cumbersome Harvester scythe, he favours his speedier twin scythes), but the demon slayer from *Devil May Cry*. Smaller foes can be launched skyward with uppercuts and held aloft with pistol fire.

The concept of choice is key, given that Vigil has seen fit to hand the reigns of creation to the player. Two different progression trees facilitate separate harbinger and necromancer evolution paths, while a new looting mechanic will enable players to tailor Death's appearance with eye-catching, stat-boosting gear commandeered from corpses. An online item-sharing mechanic suggests the range of booty will be extensive, with the rarest of trappings likely found in far-flung dungeons reserved for optional side-quests.

With a restructuring in the works, 2012 is shaping up to be a turbulent year for THQ, but there's little sign of compromise in *Darksiders II*'s progress. In the publisher's most critical hour, there's an ironic comfort in knowing a solid performance by Death could give THQ its biggest injection of life. ■



Mounting Despair

Darksiders feedback often questioned the time between the game's opening and the first appearance of War's steed, Ruin. Hence Death's ride, Despair, being available from the start of *Darksiders II*, which should help players traverse a world claimed to be four times the size of the original. Amazon customers will be able to cut this time down further courtesy of the speed increase in the 'Deadly Despair' preorder pack, although – in a somewhat uneven incentive battle – those who preorder from Game or GameStation will receive the 'Death Rides' pack, featuring two hours of sidequests with extra characters and loot.



RIGHT **Fast-fliers fear the Saber Launcher. It locks on to airborne targets only, and then fires a punchy homing missile.** BELOW **An attacker's principle weapon is speed. Defenders have several means of reducing it: force fields slow opponents and deal damage proportional to their speed, and heavier classes can sit on the flag**



Most of *Tribes*' classes are locked at the start, but you do have free access to one of each physical type: the lightly armoured pathfinder, medium soldier and heavy juggernaut



H Y
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TRIBES: ASCEND

Fight and flight in Hi-Rez's free-to-play team shooter

Publisher	Hi-Rez Studios
Developer	In-house
Format	PC
Origin	US
Release	2012

Actually getting a kill with the Saber is tricky, but only because your enemies immediately go to ground, killing their speed and giving your allies time to close in

Not that long ago, the mere thought of an FPS being played on a gamepad would have sent the average IRC channel into paroxysms of laughter. *Halo* and its ilk may have ended the unchallenged dominance of the PC shooter, but they also changed the kind of FPS games that are being made – games whose movement, health systems and weapon damage now account for the relative imprecision of analogue-stick aiming. Free-to-play team shooter *Tribes: Ascend* is a reminder of what's been lost to crossplatform development – a game where a mouse twitch makes all the difference.

Twitch, and a deftly aimed spinfusor-disc will detonate just as an enemy lands in its blast radius. Twitch, and a spray of chaingun fire will end the flight of a player travelling at 240kph. Don't twitch, and the opposing team will be halfway across the map with your flag in less time than it takes to utter a swearword.

The *Tribes* series, here in its fourth PC incarnation, has always been a blindingly fast game, given an aerial twist courtesy of a combination of jetpacks and skiing. The latter term is non-literal: it describes the player's ability to negate surface friction by holding down a key and maintaining momentum. Using this and your jetpack in combination is vital to achieving the dizzying speeds that enable you to pierce enemy defences and evade fire – ski down slopes to gain velocity, and jet up the other side. Each level is a rollercoaster of slopes, allowing players to slalom and trick-jump their way to high speeds, finding the lines that will allow them to swoop and scoop up the enemy flag.

It's not easy and many will plough into the lower foothills of the game's learning curve. But *Ascend* is exquisitely balanced, offering vital roles for new players. Though two-thirds of the classes are locked from the outset, purchasable via microtransaction or XP, new players can dive straight into a lightning-fast class as pathfinders, harass the midfield with the soldier class, or dominate the home turf as immovable juggernauts.

Defence offers a good deal of strategic depth without the intimidating prerequisites of the faster assault classes and their mastery of movement. Force fields can be placed to shut down enemy momentum, and turrets deployed to create kill zones. A generator powers your defences, and your team's need to protect and repair that, keep an eye on your flag *and* dispatch an offensive force are the shifting vulnerabilities that make the game such a dynamic and exciting duel.

Co-operation and communication are key. For a successful snatch, the pathfinder must encourage his attacking teammates to clear the flag stand with long-range bombardment, or distract defenders. These roles are not the most glorious, and some classes specialise only in weakening, distracting or disrupting enemy plans, reaping few rewards for it. While this is a powerful team strategy, it comes at the expense of the supporting player's rate of progression, a minor kink to be smoothed in the coming months of beta.

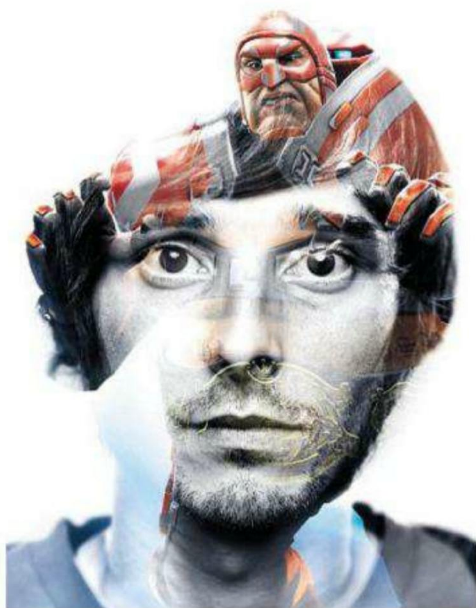
The vast majority of weapons – and all the most devastating ones – aren't hitscan-based, meaning there's a delay as each projectile travels to its target. This forces players to lead shots on fast-moving enemies and gauge detonations to tag opponents with splash damage. It creates a game that is as much about timing as it is about reactions. And timing is key in other respects: with *PlanetSide 2* also launching as free-to-play this year, an early start might just let *Tribes* snatch the sci-fi shooter flag for itself. ■

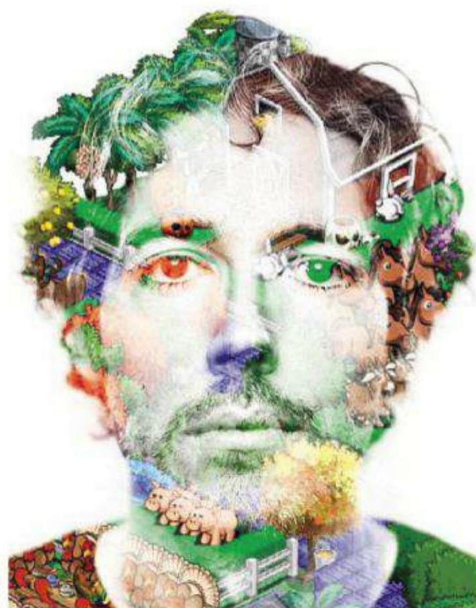
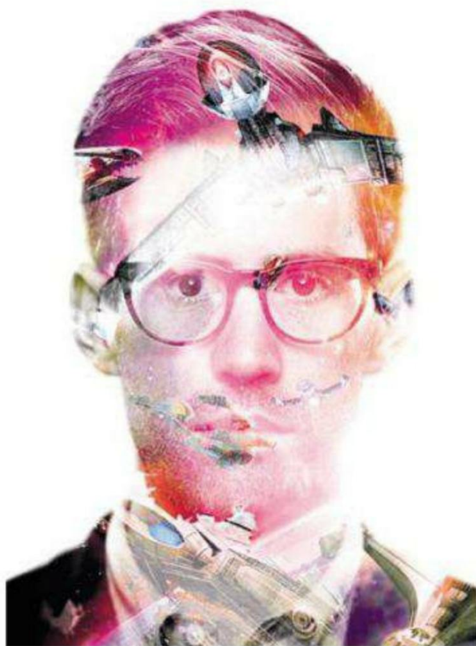


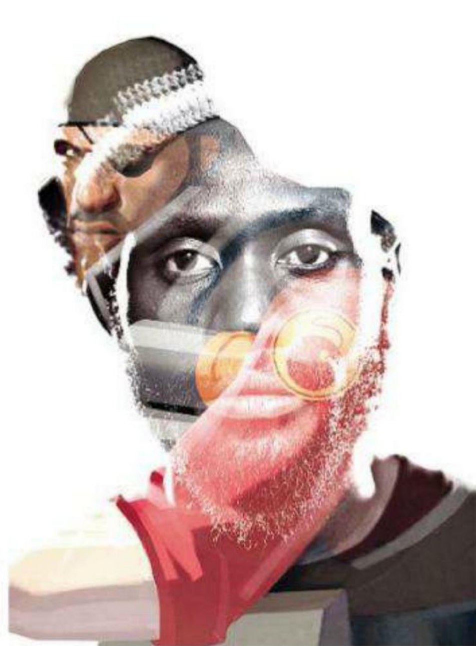
The price of victory

Ascend is generous with the spread of classes available from the off, and though none feel underpowered, you quickly covet unlockable perks, deployable packs and weapon upgrades. These do commute an undeniable advantage, but all can be acquired by expending XP rather than store-bought gold. In fact, some upgrades can *only* be bought with XP. You'll earn enough XP for an upgrade every couple of rounds or so, but opening up a new class, or an alternate weapon, means saving for a good long while. Spending £20 on the store will let you unlock and tool up an entire class, with some change to spare on an XP booster.





The Psychology Of...
Free-to-play

The rise of freemium gaming has been aided by mechanics that tap into the human psyche, but how are developers leveraging these aspects to part us from our cash? With help from researchers, we explore the factors compelling even strong-willed gamers to splurge on Smurfberries and Fancy Fedoras



urrently, free-to-play games are making quite the killing in the marketplace, although it's death by a thousand microtransactions. The idea, as the name suggests, is that you can play for free, but you can also pay for in-game conveniences, such as new content and time savers. It's been a massive success, and the model is now something of an industry darling, much to the chagrin of certain developers.

In 2010, game creator and noted essayist Ian Bogost reacted to the rise of free-to-play principles by reducing them to their essence in his tongue-in-cheek *Cow Clicker*. In the game, the main action players could take was to click a cow every few hours in order to get a 'you clicked your cow' message and a satisfying moo, but they could also buy in-game 'Mooney' and spend it to reduce the cow-clicking cooldown. Amazingly, Bogost's satirical experiment caught on and turned into a kind of Frankenstein's monster that was soon shaking down the locals for real money. Aghast and fascinated, Bogost effectively pulled the plug with a Cowpocalypse.

Some developers are taking advantage, intentionally or accidentally, of the wrinkles in human psychology to get us to pay out more

Cow Clicker wasn't a fluke. The principles of the free-to-play approach also power Facebook juggernauts, notably Zynga's *FarmVille*, and enable overnight successes in the mobile phone arena. Take a look at the list of top grossing games in the App Store and you'll see that it's mostly populated by games that are free to download, but which are supported by the in-game purchase of Smurfberries, gems, coins, and whatever those little purple things are. And don't think that the rise of free-to-play is limited to social and casual games – the model is being so well received across the industry that some MMOG PC and console games, such as *Star Trek Online* and *DC Universe Online*, have left behind traditional box-and-subscription packages in favour of the free-to-play approach.

So what's driving the model's success? It's often as simple as gamers wanting to access new content that requires a small fee. And several players we asked also told us that they parted with money simply to reward the people who were offering them great games, such as *League Of Legends* or *World Of Tanks*, free of charge

It's a way for games to stay profitable as well. Uber Entertainment creative director **John Comes** is currently working on a free-to-play 'sequel' to *Monday Night Combat*, called *Super Monday Night Combat*, and as he explains: "We put out a bunch of updates in the months following the release of *Monday Night Combat* through Steam. The only problem was that giving away updates for a $15 game wasn't really a business model we could sustain and keep our jobs." Making *Super MNC* free-to-play and with a stream of content for purchase solves that issue and lets gamers support the developers.

Yet these factors can only explain some of free-to-play's sales. Some developers are taking advantage, intentionally or accidentally, of the wrinkles in human psychology to get us to err on the 'pay' side of the equation more than we might objectively like. Psychologists have studied the principles involved, and a couple of lines of research into how people decide to buy products outside of videogames help to illuminate what's going on in our industry.

"They just wore me down," one gamer said when asked why he decided to purchase buffs to speed up his progress in doing Deeds (a kind of reputation quest) in *Lord Of The Rings Online*. His choice of words is more accurate than you might guess, because our defences against impulse shopping can indeed get worn down over time like a physical barrier.

In fact, a large body of psychological research conceptualises our self control as a pool of finite resources from which we draw whenever we need to beat down our impulses and let the rational part of our brain take charge. And just like a mana bar in traditional RPGs, this pool of self control regenerates over time. But when it gets drained, we have more trouble mustering the will to resist our urges. "To monitor and act to achieve our goals requires having sufficient psychological resources," says researcher **Ron Faber**, who studies the impact of self-control depletion on impulse purchases at the University Of Minnesota. "We view self-regulation as





requiring the use of a pool of resources that at any one point in time are finite or limited."

Think of it as a muscle, he advises: "If you lift a 10lb weight with your arm, you may initially do so with ease. However, as you continue to do so, you use up resources and continued lifting becomes harder and harder until you can't do it any more. But if you rest for a little while, the resources are replenished."

Dr Roy Baumeister and his colleagues pioneered this concept of 'ego depletion' in a series of experiments at Case Western Reserve University, Ohio. They asked subjects to exert self control by requesting they eat raw radishes instead of delicious chocolate chip cookies that had been left out on a table, and observed them through a one-way mirror. Some people looked longingly at the cookies or even picked them up to slyly sniff at them when they thought they were alone, but nobody bit into them. With the subjects' mental reserves sapped by self restraint, the researchers then had them engage in a series of problem-solving games. Relative to a comparison group of people who were allowed to eat the cookies, those who had to exhibit self control lost patience with the game and called it quits in less than half the time. In a follow-up experiment, the researchers depleted their subjects' self-control resources by having them suppress smiles while watching a stand-up comedy routine, and their findings in terms of how long this group would persist in a word puzzle game were similar.

There's evidence that ego depletion bought about by exerting self control can make us more susceptible to impulse buying

What these experiments show is that self-restraint takes something out of you, and with it gone you're more likely to give up on boring or difficult tasks. It's not difficult to see how the same could be true of game-based activities, such as grinding out reputation points or taking the long way back to town instead of simply opting to buy reputation ranks or fast-travel spells from an in-game store.

In fact, there's evidence that the kind of ego depletion brought about by exerting self control can make us more susceptible to making impulse purchases. Faber and associate professor Kathleen Vohs examined impulse spending by forcing experimental subjects to exercise self control in various ways and then tempted them to spend their $10 participation payment on small items such as sweets or mugs. Relative to those who had experienced no ego depletion, these subjects made more impulse purchases.

So ego depletion borne of exercising restraint makes us more likely to give up on difficult and boring tasks, plus it increases the likelihood that we'll make impulse purchases once our self-control resources have been used up. Put those two pieces together and imagine a hypothetical free-to-play game hitting a player with repeated offers of perks in exchange for real money or inviting their friends to play. Although that person may initially resist, if they allow their self control to become depleted and aren't given a chance to recuperate then they may eventually succumb to a bit of impulse decision making. This could either take the form of a micropayment or permission to spam their friends list with invitations to download yet another *FarmVille* clone.

Because our self-control resources regenerate, the timing of in-game offers is important. If the pitch to buy a fast-travel token comes quickly on the heels of tasks that required concentration or the power to resist your urges, it's more likely to open our wallets. "You're unlikely to successfully sell something to a player until they've bought into the game," says **David Edery**, who is the CEO of developer Spry Fox and the author of the book Changing The Game: How Video Games Are Transforming The Future Of Business. "This means an aggressive sales strategy right from the starting experience is probably not going to be viable."

Faber and his colleagues agree, citing the process of customisation as another opportunity to drain mental resources and hit you with sales pitches. "Kathleen [Vohs] and I found that people who need to make a lot of product choices are more likely to be susceptible to impulse purchasing," he says. "Some product Web sites, like those for computers or cars, make people configure their ideal product by selecting from a large number of features. These choices can deplete people and make them more willing to spend more money for the chosen item." While again not directly related to

Taxing reserves

Resisting temptation isn't the only way to drain our self control. Researchers have found that some mentally demanding tasks can weaken our resolve. "Well over 100 studies have shown that using up any of these resources makes subsequent efforts at self regulation across a wide range of behaviours more difficult," Faber says. So thinking hard and wracking your brain just in the process of playing a demanding game can make you more susceptible to spending money if the timing is right.





David Edery (top), CEO of game developer Spry Fox, and Ron Faber, Professor of Mass Communication at the University Of Minnesota

gaming, keep these studies in mind the next time you go through the character creation or levelling up process in a free-to-play game.

It seems wearing us down with offers works, but what about the emotions at play when you decide to buy a little something extra? Well, it can boil down to jealousy. Although most players wouldn't admit it, plenty of research tells us that one of the most powerful purchasing motivators is envy. Sometimes you don't know what you want until somebody in *Team Fortress 2* beats you down with it.

But it's not just any kind of envy that motivates us to pursue purchases. Researchers have distinguished between 'benign envy' and 'malicious envy'. Explained in a series of papers by assistant professor **Niels Van De Ven** and his colleagues at Tilburg University in the Netherlands, malicious envy is the kind we may

> **"Envy acts as an economic lubricant. The more desirable possessions other people have, the more envious other people become"**

be more familiar with. It's the 'They've got something I want; I wish they didn't have it' variety. Cries of, 'Ice Storm is OP! Nerf mages!' in the wake of a new patch are often due to malicious envy. Benign envy, on the other hand, occurs when someone else has something we want, but we think they deserve to have it. They worked for it, or it's a reward for their good character, but we want it too.

The difference is that when we experience benign envy, we don't want to tear the other person down as much as we want to build ourselves up to get what they have. If someone kills a world boss in an MMORPG or works through Prestige mode in *Call Of Duty*, most of us will think they deserve whatever reward they get for completing these tasks, but we may still be envious of them. Striving to repeat the deeds that got the other person that reward is one course of action, but benign envy may also lead us to pay what Niels Van De Ven and his colleagues have termed 'an envy premium' to get it if we're given the option to.

As part of his team's research into how benign envy gets people to spend more money than they otherwise would on some desirable trinket, Van De Ven and his team looked to one source of envy that many of us are familiar with: Apple's iPhone. In one study, they found that when subjects were made benignly envious of friends who got new iPhones, they not only wanted the gadget, but were willing to pay an average of 64 per cent more for it than those experiencing no envy. That's no small premium for a device that already has a hefty price tag. "Envy acts as an economic lubricant," surmised Van De Ven. "The more desirable possessions other people have, the more envious other people become and therefore buy more as well."

The implication for free-to-play game developers is that making some rewards attainable through skill and effort could also make them sell faster to those who don't have the time or ability to acquire them otherwise. This seems especially relevant for highly visible purchases, such as skins, armour, or custom titles. As such, benign envy seems likely to play a major part in all the cash Blizzard will rake in through *Diablo III*'s real-money auction house. You may have earned that set of enormous, glowing shoulder pads by grinding the heck out of the end-game boss and getting a lucky drop, and others might be inspired by their benign envy to try to do the same. But if they can find a set on sale in the auction house, they're also more likely to pay out, and pay more, than if they'd never seen you flaunting them.

What all the above research highlights is that while there are many good reasons to loosen the purse strings in free-to-play titles, there are least a few situations where you should take pause and ask yourself what your motivations are for making a purchase. Paying good money for good content and better experiences can be great. And free-to-play as a business model isn't going anywhere, because it serves a lot of people's needs and desires. But when you decide whether to fork over micropayments for a fancy new paint job or a shortcut that shaves off hours of grind time, you should make sure you're doing it for the right reasons. The nature of free-to-play games presents developers with many opportunities to get you to pay more than you may want, and some will take advantage of your psychological triggers to relieve you of your cash. Pay if you like, but don't let any game unjustifiably manipulate your decision in one direction or the other. ■

Green eyes

John Comes, a key figure on Uber Entertainment's *Super Monday Night Combat*, knows the psychological weight of envy: "We think envy is a large factor in what drives sales in a free-to-play game. *Super Monday Night Combat* only has cosmetic changes that are unlocked solely through Uber Points, our currency that is only unlocked with real money. We offer up various uniforms and taunts that players can use in-game. Uniforms can be seen at all times when playing and in the class chooser, players can taunt at any point through the game, and at the end of the game we put the winners up on a pedestal and allow them to taunt. Envy was the driving force behind designing such in-game moments, where these things are up front and in your face."



Uber Entertainment creative director John Comes has also worked as a game designer at Gas Powered Games, EA and Westwood Studios



C R ★ I
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M E S

In this exclusive extract from Jacked: The Unauthorised Behind-The-Scenes Story Of Grand Theft Auto, David Kushner tracks the wild success of GTAIII and its effect on Rockstar Games

"Please welcome **Colin Hanks**!"

It was January 16, 2002, and **Jon Stewart**, the host of The Daily Show, eagerly greeted his next guest. Hanks, the boyish 24-year-old actor and son of star Tom Hanks, was in town to promote his latest film, Orange County. Yet what he really wanted to talk about was a new videogame, *Grand Theft Auto III*, the mention of which elicited a burst of applause from one gamer in the crowd. "He knows what I'm talking about!" Hanks deadpanned.

Stewart sank his head in his hands, laughing, as Hanks recounted his adventures with mobsters and hookers. "If you want your money back when she gets out of the car, you run her over," Hanks continued, "problem solved!"

Stewart replied, "Now I know what to ask for, for the holidays!" He wasn't the only one. *GTAIII* was an immediate sensation. Game reviewers raved. GameSpy called it "an insanely well-made and fun game to play... proof of the power behind the PS2's hardware." GamePro magazine said it "makes an offer you can't refuse: live a life of crime and reap the rewards that come with it." Game Informer said it "shatters the standards set by its predecessors." Entertainment Weekly deemed it "every bad boy's dream (and every parent's nightmare)."

"Grand Theft Auto III showed that Rockstar was thinking quite deeply about culture"

Players swapped tales of their adventures in the game as if they had taken place in real life. "The first few days," posted one online, "I did nothing but run around the city stealing cars and running over hookers." Though women played the game, *GTAIII* was undeniably the stuff of dudes – raucous, enraged, frenzied. The game gave even the most powerless person a way to unleash his most violent fantasies, but in a world made from pixels where no one real got hurt. The most common reaction to flattening a pedestrian during the game wasn't a gasp, after all, it was laughter. To suggest that the game could cause players to run over people in real life would only make them laugh harder.

A commentator on National Public Radio swooned about driving aimlessly within the game with the radio cranked while the sun set on the horizon. "You become like [Ralph Waldo] Emerson's transparent eyeball," he gushed, "seeing everything, consisting of nothing." For **Dr Henry Jenkins**, the director of comparative media studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, *GTAIII* marked a new frontier. "Now that we've colonised physical space," he said, "the need to have new frontiers is deeply in the games. *GTA* expands the universe."

Fuelled by reviews and word-of-mouth buzz, *GTAIII* became the fastest-selling, highest-grossing title for PlayStation 2 with more than six million games sold around the world. Take-Two's stock soared from $7 a share in October 2001, three weeks before the launch of *GTAIII*, to almost $20 a share in January 2002. At one point, Rockstar Games held the top spots on the game charts, with *GTA III* number one, followed by its dark thriller, *Max Payne*. Including these two games and *State Of Emergency*, Rockstar soon had three titles in the top ten.

GTAIII permeated the culture at large, just as Rockstar co-founder **Sam Houser** had always dreamed. The shout-outs on The Daily Show. Mixtapes in New York with *GTA* sound bites. Even ecstasy pills allegedly floating around clubs with the Rockstar logo, not a company PR campaign but simply an act of love, it seemed, from fans. Rockstar also got its due from the peers who once mocked them for having the audacity to name themselves Rockstar. When Rockstar producer **Jeronimo Barrera**, dressed in a zoot suit, accepted the trophy for game of the year from the industry's Game Developers Choice Awards, he said, "This is to show that videogames don't have to be about hobgoblins and dwarves!"

GTAIII's success helped propel the US game business to a record $9.4 billion in sales for 2001, a 40 per cent increase from the previous year – and enough to dwarf the $8.38 billion in film box-office sales. Sony, which had signed the *GTA* franchise exclusively to its consoles, rode the success to the top of the industry, outperforming rivals Microsoft and Nintendo, who had just released their new consoles, the Xbox and GameCube, respectively, in November (Xbox, ironically, was riding high on the success of *Halo*, the sci-fi shooter Take-Two had relinquished to Microsoft, after the company bought the game's creators, Bungie). Before long, Sony had shipped almost 30 million PS2 systems.

Sony's **Phil Harrison** marvelled at *GTAIII*'s huge re-orders and crossover success. Like Sam, he had long wanted to expand the market for gamers, and Rockstar had tapped into something broad. "It demonstrated that Rockstar was thinking quite deeply about culture and the way that people would play the game," he said. "*GTA* probably defined the zeitgeist better than anything else."

In Japan, home to Sony's headquarters, *GTAIII* represented a seismic shift within the country's storied game culture and industry. Nintendo's two decades of family-friendly rule seemed quaint compared to the naughty new age of *GTAIII*. Yet the changes raised eyebrows at Sony, too. Government ministries began to question Sony's execs. At a dinner party, the wife of Sony's founder was said to have admonished the PlayStation group over *GTAIII*. "Oh," she said, "I hear your games are very violent."

Harrison and others in the west did their best to reassure their counterparts in Japan. "Look," Harrison would say, "if we're going to be a full-spectrum entertainment platform, we're supposed to have everything from Mickey Mouse to Mickey Rourke. We have to have a complete spectrum of entertainment on the platform if we're going to be truly mass market." Japan formed its own Computer Entertainment Ratings Organization, similar to the ESRB in the United States, to help monitor the new generation of games.

As outrage spread over *GTAIII* – particularly, the hooker cheat – the game became a lightning rod around the world. It exposed the bias and confusion reserved for this young medium. Though similar battles had played out before – over pinball, comic books, rock music, and Dungeons & Dragons – this meant little to the public at large. Still viewed as children's toys, videogames were deemed an unacceptable forum for adult content. Although people clearly understood the difference between movies and TV shows meant for children or adults, videogames didn't get the same consideration. The fact that *GTAIII* was explicitly and voluntarily rated M for Mature (with a mandatory label on its ads and covers) fell flat.

In Australia, the Office of Film and Literature Classification Board, the country's federal body responsible for rating media products, denied it a rating due to its depiction of what it classified as "acts of sexualised violence." *GTAIII* was not only illegal to sell, but illegal to view. Retailers faced up to two years in jail and tens of thousands of dollars in fines for even displaying it. Players were told to bring the games back to the stores or face criminal charges if they were to show the game to others.

In England, the director of a child advocacy group called Children Now warned that games threatened to desensitise kids to violence. A psychologist at the University of Northumbria said "newer breeds of increasingly sophisticated games encourage solitary behaviour and tendencies towards rebellion." When the National Institute On Media And The Family, a non-profit child advocacy group in the US, released its annual Video and Computer Game Report in December 2001, *GTAIII* was picked as the number-one game for parents to avoid. "We have enough violence in the real world," said **Senator Herb Kohl**. "We don't need to wrap it up in a bow and give it to children as a present."

US representative **Joe Baca**, a democrat from southern California, introduced the Protect Children from Video Game Sex and Violence Act of 2002, which would make it illegal to sell an M-rated game to anyone under 17 without permission from parents. "We saw what happened in Columbine," Baca warned on CNN. "These are kids that are being programmed. They play the videogames, they take the action and the character; they began to play that character, and then they began to commit those particular crimes. It's a shame when we have *GTAIII*. We have another one as well — we have the *State Of Emergency*. We look at a lot of the gang-by shooting that goes on, the riots that are going on in the immediate area. We have got to stop this."

Over at the Interactive Digital Software Association, **Doug Lowenstein** tried in vain to counter what he called "the exaggerated claims of ideologically oriented politicians and media critics who favour putting government, not parents, in charge of the entertainment used by our kids." Yet he refused to jump to the defence of the industry's most controversial publisher. "We shouldn't be spokespersons for the Housers," Lowenstein later said. "That's their game."

Cheese ball! Cheese ball! Cheese ball!

It was late one cold November night at Radio Mexico, the dive bar and restaurant downtown in New York City. Multicoloured balloons with streamers bobbed against the low ceiling. Holiday lights wrapped the windows. Dozens of partying 20-somethings in hoodies and trucker hats jammed inside, but the door was firmly closed to anyone passing by.

In honour of Sam's 29th birthday, Rockstar was celebrating its most awesome tradition: the annual cheese ball-eating contest. The object was to devour more gooey, greasy, deep-fried, chilli pepper-sauced, baseball-size globes of fat than anyone else. It wasn't easy. In addition to

packing down the lard bombs, competitors had to endure chaos around them.

While they ate at a centre table, Rockstars waved fistfuls of cash as if they were betting on horses. Wagering was encouraged; screaming, the norm. Sam's brother and Rockstar co-founder **Dan Houser**, the announcer, shouted through a bullhorn so that he could be heard above the wailing sirens. The winning ball guzzler got $2,000, two plane tickets to anywhere – and serious bragging rights, especially when the record count hit 24. Some competitors wore yellow headbands scrawled with the words "Eat Strong". In between cheese balls, they had to eat rounds of jalapeño poppers. Buckets were left around the room for vomiting, and they got used. Casualties rinsed with tequila and lime.

Afterward, they passed out awards – such as "Most Likely to Fuck Someone in the Office," "Most Likely to be in the Office at 4am" – made from medallions with the Rockstar logo. "Despite the industry's reputation as being male-dominated, Rockstar was about an equal mix of guys and girls, all young, and all more than willing to get shitfaced on any night of the week," Rockstar producer **Jeff Williams** later recalled.

On the heels of *GTAIII*, it was a good time to be a Rockstar. Money and drinks flowed. It was the ultimate private club, where members called one another militaristically by their last names. As a sign of faith, employees each received a pewter ring with the Rockstar logo. They also received real US Army jackets, personalised with the Rockstar logo and their street number, 575, on the back. They wore them with pride, sauntering through game conventions as fans cleared a path.

Few felt more empowered than self-described 'details guy' **Marc Fernandez** and producer **Jeremy Pope**. "Imagine a company where a hundred people felt like they were in the Beatles," Fernandez recalled. Pope credited Sam. "It's easy to see his genius in all this," he went on. "He really understands you really have to have all the style in world, but have to marry that with really hard work and strong technology. He understands you need the whole package."

Weathering the controversy over *GTA*, however, was proving more difficult. Though they put out perfunctory statements assuring the public that the company "makes every effort to market its games responsibly, targeting advertising and marketing only to adult consumers," they tried to stay out of the socio-political debate. "I didn't think we could win," Take-Two president/director **Paul Eibeler** recalled. Navid Khonsari, *GTA*'s director, got an email telling him to lie low as the press descended on the hooker story. "This is going to blow up," he was told. "Just keep your head down and don't talk to the press."

The nuances of the hookers in the game were lost on the general public. *GTA* didn't require you to kill a prostitute to increase your score or anything like that. Players who robbed and murdered the women were simply doing it of their own accord. It was, as Rockstar co-founder **Jamie King** later put it, "an inadvertent consequence of sandbox gameplay. It was in the user, it was in his mind. What does this say about him?" At the same time, King knew that Rockstar was pressing buttons. "We put ourselves out to be the next poster child of this medium," he said.

No matter how erudite the founders of Rockstar were about American pop culture, they failed to take something essential into account: how puritanically people would view their games. This extended to their own peers. To their dismay, **Jason Rubin**, the co-founder of Naughty Dog, makers of the kid-friendly and best-selling *Crash Bandicoot* franchise, told the Los Angeles Times that selling *GTAIII* was "like selling cigarettes to kids."

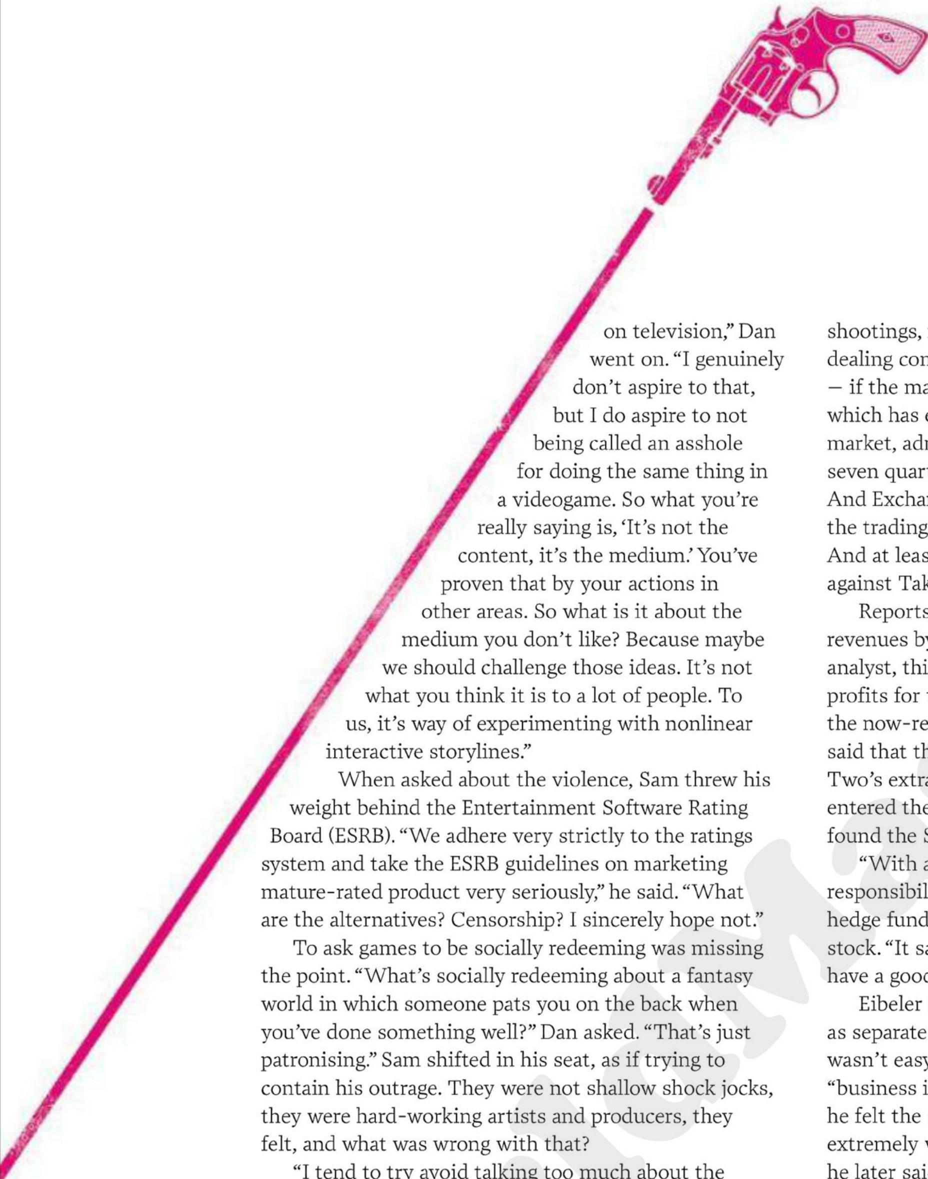
Naughty Dog's Jason Rubin told the LA Times that selling GTAIII was "like selling cigarettes to kids"

Though some on the outside might find it hard to believe, the attacks wounded the inner circle of Rockstar. They knew they were giving millions of people an entertaining outlet but couldn't help but wonder if they were crossing some dangerous line. "Are we doing something that's morally wrong?" King wondered. "We were always questioning ourselves and criticising ourselves," he later recalled.

When a reporter for Rolling Stone came by the office for a feature on Rockstar, however, the co-founders dismissed any notion of responsibility. Ragged and unshaven as they sat in a back room, **Terry Donovan** and the Housers took their critics to task. "If you realise PlayStation owners aren't all ten," Donovan said, "there isn't some kind of social responsibility to have a redeeming social value."

"Why are we having this conversation?" Dan asked rhetorically. "It's insane. We get dragged into these stupid conversations about, 'Are you brainwashing children?' or whatever rubbish it is that month. It's like, 'How can we as adults be having this conversation when we both know that you're talking crap?' It's just not even complicated.

"If this was a movie or TV show and was the best in its field, you'd give it loads of awards and put those award shows



on television," Dan went on. "I genuinely don't aspire to that, but I do aspire to not being called an asshole for doing the same thing in a videogame. So what you're really saying is, 'It's not the content, it's the medium.' You've proven that by your actions in other areas. So what is it about the medium you don't like? Because maybe we should challenge those ideas. It's not what you think it is to a lot of people. To us, it's way of experimenting with nonlinear interactive storylines."

When asked about the violence, Sam threw his weight behind the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). "We adhere very strictly to the ratings system and take the ESRB guidelines on marketing mature-rated product very seriously," he said. "What are the alternatives? Censorship? I sincerely hope not."

To ask games to be socially redeeming was missing the point. "What's socially redeeming about a fantasy world in which someone pats you on the back when you've done something well?" Dan asked. "That's just patronising." Sam shifted in his seat, as if trying to contain his outrage. They were not shallow shock jocks, they were hard-working artists and producers, they felt, and what was wrong with that?

"I tend to try avoid talking too much about the violence because that's what it all gets boiled down to at the end of the day," Sam said. "But when you do something wrong in the game, the police come and get you... You don't just run around on a rampage and just carry on, carry on, carry on. You do commit crimes, and the police are on you. You commit more, and they're on you more, and you commit more, the FBI will turn up, the SWAT will turn up, and then the army turns up. If that doesn't reinforce a moral code in a game, I don't know what does."

"Have you seen the New York Times?"

One day at Rockstar, King got this message from his dad. King had a good relationship with his father, who took pride in his son's accomplishments in the game industry. Yet his dad had phoned to warn him that maybe something seriously outlaw was taking place behind the scenes.

The headline of the Times' page-one business section story read, "Hit Video Games Overshadow Company's Woes." King read on. "Can looting, drive-by shootings, random beatings, prostitution and drug dealing compensate for accounting irregularities? Maybe – if the mayhem has really great graphics... Take-Two, which has emerged as a leader in the game software market, admitted early this year... to having misstated seven quarters of financial returns. The Securities And Exchange Commission forced a three-week halt in the trading of its shares and is continuing to investigate. And at least five shareholder lawsuits are under way against Take-Two."

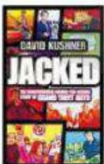
Reports found that Take-Two had overstated revenues by $23 million in 2000. According to one analyst, this resulted in a sizable increase in reported profits for the year – a figure of $24.6 million, instead of the now-revised figure of $6.4 million. Another analyst said that the actions constituted fraud. Given Take-Two's extraordinary success since founder Ryan Brant entered the game industry, the financial community found the SEC investigation especially foreboding.

"With all this stuff about Enron and corporate responsibility, there's a wrong message here," said one hedge fund manager who lost money on Take-Two stock. "It says, 'Who cares about the past, now that we have a good game.' It says, 'Crime does pay.'"

Eibeler and the other execs tried to keep Rockstar as separate as they could from the problems, but it wasn't easy. "Keep your head down," Eibeler told them, "business is great, look at the success." Yet privately, he felt the strain. "While the company was performing extremely well, financially we were under a real cloud," he later said.

Though Sam kept his team insulated from Take-Two, the underlings weren't entirely surprised by the investigations. There had been a revolving door of Take-Two executives, after all. The problems hit especially hard on the two Rockstar co-founders in the shadows, King and **Gary Foreman**. Since launching the company with Donovan, the Housers and King, Foreman felt a split forming between the founders. It had started with the press and the positioning of Donovan and Sam as the faces of Rockstar. Foreman, shy by nature, had been happy to let them have the spotlight, but cracks were starting to show that he could no longer ignore.

Foreman would later recall the day when Sam came up to him enthusiastically and said, "Within a couple years, we can all be millionaires! It will be amazing!" Then Sam amended his comment. "You know," he added, "I'm not going to stop until I get a billion." As Foreman watched him walk away, he thought about Sam's incessant passion for pushing boundaries, for pushing games, for getting the most out of whatever he could. "Knowing him," he thought, "a billion won't be enough."



Jacked: The Unauthorised Behind-The-Scenes Story Of Grand Theft Auto by David Kushner is published by Collins and on sale now



Heidi Laughton

AN AUDIENCE WITH...

DAVID JAFFE

As he prepares to leave Eat Sleep Play, Twisted Metal's hip-shooting designer mulls over his next move

"That emotion we got when wife and kid is still not emotion [in] even a really

We catch up with **David Jaffe** following his talk at the DICE Summit in Las Vegas, in which he's called for game stories to be driven not by cutscenes, but by players. Despite his love for *Skyrim* and *Batman: Arkham City*, he bemoans the fact that you begin such sprawling, open-world games bound by narrative constraints. He's also getting ready to leave Eat Sleep Play, the studio he co-founded in 2007, which is now shifting its focus to mobile games. At this key time for the designer, we ask him about his storytelling philosophy and updating *Twisted Metal,* and learn how The West Wing played a part in his latest career move.



CV

After graduating from the University Of Southern California, Jaffe joined Sony in 1993 as a tester. His design debut, 16bit platformer *Mickey Mania*, was released the following year. In 1995, he joined with Scott Campbell on the original *Twisted Metal*, then worked on the first two *God Of War* games. He and Campbell set up Eat Sleep Play in 2007, signing a three-year deal with Sony. His latest game, also called *Twisted Metal*, has recently been released in North America and Europe.

***Twisted Metal* must have posed a lot of new challenges, given the fact that it's your first online-focused, multiplayer game. You seem to have spent a lot of time on Twitter apologising for matchmaking issues.**

It's been really disappointing and exciting. It's been great that when people get online the vast majority are just like, "Holy cow, it's really fucking fun." A lot of people are picking up the depth and the nuance that we designed in, and are digging that as well. So I love that, because once they get past [the issues] they're having a great time, and that's the best thing a designer can hear.

But on the flipside, one of the reasons I'm such an Apple addict is that it just works out of the box. That certainly influences the work that I do and the teams that I work with. It's a shitty experience when you buy something, you get it home and it just doesn't work. People tell me *Battlefield 3* had problems for a few weeks, that most online games have problems, and I get that, but I still think it's shitty. I bought this fucking thing – it should just work.

You begged on Twitter for someone to break the *Twisted Metal* embargo and give you a review score. As a game designer, do embargoes frustrate you?

Yes and no. That's the publisher world, and there are reasons for it, and they're not always as obvious as you'd think. We were literally tuning and tweaking the day-one patch up until a week and a half before we gave titles out; then we had to get that patch into QA and through format. I didn't want people playing it and reviewing it until they had that patch, to judge the experience the gamer's going to be getting.

But you're sitting there at your computer and, yeah, you're desperate. Is it good? Is it shitty? Do we still have careers after this? Fucking throw me a bone! But no one did, and I really respect that, but in the same way I tell my kids they can't eat candy all day. One day they'll respect it, but in the meantime they're like, "You fucker, I want that Kit-Kat."

And now you're leaving Eat Sleep Play, right?

Yeah, I'll be leaving at the end of March. I'll be sticking around to do my duties for free after I leave, because I love this game so much. I'm so proud of the team and the game. It's really the best thing I've worked on in terms of the multiplayer. Until March, I'll be working there on patches for things like balancing and tuning – all of the sort of exploits that we did our best to catch, but you never really know until the game goes live. Afterwards, even though I won't be on the books, I'll never let it go until they shut the servers down.

What do you take away from your time with ESP?

I got to work on a game that I truly love. I got to direct a game that really speaks to where I am as a designer, which is gameplay first, mechanics first, and speaking the language of the medium as best as I know how. I'm grateful for having worked with the team, and my relationship with Sony, and that I got to work from home. I got to watch my kids grow up when they were very young.

But I love The West Wing, and one of the reasons that spoke to me so much is I was watching Leo McGarry go round and build his team that worked with Bartlet to get him elected, and when I saw that – about a year ago, when I first got into the series – it made me realise the necessity of surrounding yourself with not like-minded, but like-ambitious people. People who have the same drive, the same goals, the same hunger for doing really cool stuff as you. Scott and I thought we'd be doing great things for a long time, but it was a real eye-opener when I started watching The West Wing. I thought, 'Holy cow, I'm no longer with my people.'

There's a line in The West Wing when they're trying to hire a Republican – "The president likes smart people

Kratos hugged his as effective as the great TV commercial"



If Jaffe was to make *God Of War* today, he says it would be quite a different game, giving players "a lot more freedom, so that you can actually play in the space, and be immersed in the space and its mechanics"

who disagree with him" – which seems like a pretty smart recruitment policy. Would you agree?
There's an individual in the press I don't get on with. This person and I have gone back and forth over the years, and we used to work together. But if I could work with this person again – even though I'd want to jump out of the window ten times a day and he'd want to push me – I would. I'd rather emerge from the trenches beaten the shit up but go, "Hey, world, here's something we think's pretty cool." I haven't worked on many games that have been totally smooth sailing, but those that have been weren't anywhere near as good as the ones that we had to go to war to make cool.

So where do you go from here?
As much as I'm looking at doing a big next-gen title, a big IP in that space, I'm very interested in doing action games in PC and Mac browser windows, or smart TVs. The entertainment landscape has become overwhelmingly fragmented in terms of choices. I have very fond memories of hanging out with my parents and my brother on Thursday nights, and we'd watch The Cosby Show and Family Ties, and the next day everyone would be talking about them. And cable comes along, and that's gone, and the same thing is happening with interactive entertainment.

We used to have so few choices. You'd pay whatever the price was for a game and you'd put up with a lot of shit because it was your only option. I was playing *Twisted Metal* last night and I was just like, "Fuck, man." Booting up the PS3, going through the Sony logo, the Sony Santa Monica logo, the ESP logo, the legal stuff, then the title screen – are you fucking kidding me? We've gotten so used to being the only game in town that a lot of us have been caught unawares. It's amazing to me how little people take into account the user experience from beginning to end. That's one of the reasons browser gaming appeals. It's always on; it's instant.

Browser gaming means free-to-play, and a completely different approach to making money, though, right?
I think up until this point it's been driven by the business model rather than the game design, and because of that I think we see real gamers going, "Fuck this – this is disrespectful." I think that needs to adjust if we're going to bring gamers in. Because they deserve to benefit from this new model, too – it just needs to change in order to suit who they are. They're not going to want to give you five bucks for a better weapon, either. If they get a better weapon, a gamer's going to want to have earned it. I don't want to go online as a new player and have my ass kicked just because someone else has spent more money. That doesn't work.

In your DICE talk, you called for more player-authored stories and for less focus on cinematic storytelling techniques, but wasn't *God Of War* quite guilty of that?
It certainly isn't the [guiltiest]. Even within the first game, there was conscious effort to say, "Let's make sure there's a health orb chest, and a magic chest, and they're on separate floors," so the player's brain becomes engaged about where to use each thing, how to map those resources. Even though we broke it up, it wasn't devoid of important player choices. I feel we made a great IP, and I'm very proud of the game, but I don't feel that you can play it and say that its story is better than any story that was nominated this year for an Oscar, or the best book of the year. That emotion we got when Kratos hugged his wife and kid is still not as effective as the emotion [in] even a really great TV commercial.

At first, I thought this meant that I simply wasn't capable of delivering it, and maybe that's true to an extent, but I think ultimately it made me think these things were never meant to come together. I think we got kind of bamboozled because of the technology, the 3D cameras and the trappings of filmic language, and said, "Ah, we should make movies that are interactive." No, we should continue along the roads of the best games ever made and improve them and evolve them, but do so with the heart and soul of the medium, which is interactivity, as the goal. Not by trying to make movies.

What about the *Uncharted* series, which goes in the opposite direction to what you're proposing?
Uncharted does so much so beautifully well. As someone who's not a great writer, I look at the quality of dialogue and performance, and that's something to be applauded. And emulated, if the developer is capable – I'd certainly love to think that we would one day be capable of such a thing. In terms of gameplay choices, I don't know. It's really hard for

"I don't think many of us in games have respect for the player's brain"

me to have an opinion on it, because I love the genre; I'm a big action-adventure fan. I'd be curious as to what that experience would be like if it was opened up a little bit. I think it would be an interesting experiment to find out if they could retain the wonderful flavour of that series while still giving the player a little bit more leash to run on.

Amy Hennig says it's necessary to take control out of players' hands to do what she wants to do with the story.
That was the crux of my DICE talk. What are we doing? I do wonder about the choices that we make. I have the utmost respect for Amy, because she's one of the nicest people in the industry. Holy cow, she and Tim Schafer are the nicest people I've ever met. She did the *Soul Reaver* series – total freedom, totally open, total choice – and then went to *Jak And Daxter 3* and *Uncharted*. So she's played the field, and I think that's really cool.

I was playing *Uncharted: Golden Abyss* the other day, watching a cutscene, then it gives me control of Nathan and I take like six steps and I'm in another cutscene. My concern – not so much with *Uncharted*, but a lot of games – is that I don't think many of us have respect for the player's brain, the player's mind, when we make our design choices. We're not putting ourselves in the shoes of people sitting down to play a game, rather than watch a movie. If you want to do it consciously, then go for it, but know what you're doing. I think a lot of us just think, 'Oh, we're like movies now. Let's use movie language,' and it comes at a cost.

Yet if a *Metal Gear Solid* game chained cutscenes like that, we'd praise it for messing with player expectations.
Metal Gear is one of my favourite series of all time, and when I talk about this next IP I want to do, I'd take a lot of the non-linear but still structured gameplay from *Metal Gear*. But that game needs an editor like nobody's business.

You singled out *Arkham City*'s opening for critique: there's this huge open world, and you spend the first few minutes only being able to move the camera around. But can you really give players all that freedom without putting it in some kind of context?
Absolutely, I'm a big fan of context; I think it should be peppered throughout the entire experience. One of my favourite parts of *Arkham City* is Catwoman's move where she actually kisses one of the people she's fighting to distract him, and I'm like, "That's fucking context." That's context in gameplay. It's so cool.

I ran into the Rocksteady guys in the bathroom after DICE, and we were talking about [the opening]. They said they did it consciously – they didn't want to throw players straight into the middle. Like wading into the water vs being thrown overboard. Which is great, but it still didn't work for me as a player.

Are you ready for next-gen consoles? Are there any features you'd like to be included to enable you to make the games you want to make?
I couldn't care less about next-gen. I started at Sony Imagesoft doing Super Nintendo and Sega Genesis games, and I went through that to PS1, then PS2, PS3, Vita... You go through the cycle enough and you realise today's 'Oh my fucking God' is tomorrow's 'Ehh, whatever'.

Ultimately, this is all going to be yesterday's news and it's about the experience, the game. Unless we're talking about holodecks, or AI that's so amazing it can actually write a compelling story around you procedurally based on your choices, I'm not interested. I'm no longer that excited about next-gen technology; it means budgets go up, which sucks. The biggest thing I want is what you get from the PSP and the 3DS – it's always on, there's a sleep mode and I can just hit a button and I'm right back where I was and I don't have to go through all the boot-up shit.

So you're striking out, setting up on your own. How do you hope it all pans out?
I have this vision in my head of being 70, and you come into our offices and you're surrounded by artwork and posters and boxes of things that we've done that have brought a lot of happiness and joy to people.

My goal is to be different. I don't want to be Scorsese; I'd rather be Bruckheimer than Scorsese. I love the idea of looking back at a career and thinking, 'Wow, we entertained a shit-ton of people.' That, to me, is a wonderfully noble thing to leave behind. ■

TIME TO WING IT

After he leaves Eat Sleep Play, Jaffe will set out on his own, and had several meetings at DICE to discuss his ideas with publishers. "They were very nascent – the relationships are very new," he says. "We'll be doing follow-up meetings in a month, and that's where we start getting serious. But it's me and my dog, Austin, right now." He hopes to have something up and running within three to eight months. And the name? Another West Wing reference. "If I can get away with it, the new company is going to be called Bartlet For America."

PLAY

REVIEWS. INTERVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

1080° Snowboarding N64
Holy heck, Nintendo's 64bit console doesn't get along with an HDTV, but it can't stop *1080°*'s purity of play and simplicity of style from feeling as fresh as it did over a decade ago. With coding duties handled by the *Wave Race 64* team, *1080°*'s peaks and powder are as well-realised and inviting as the prior game's lapping waves. Calming, considered and crucial.

Mass Effect 2 360, PC, PS3
Punchier, darker and more streamlined than BioWare's original sprawling sci-fi space opera, *Mass Effect 2* is a neon-bathed, adrenaline-flushed RPG for the *Gears* generation. What the series excels at is lore and character, though, so building the second instalment around gathering a team proves a stroke of utter genius. And whatever path you take feels even more vital with the closing chapter looming on the horizon like a Reaper.

The Lost City iOS
Fire Maple Games' latest drops you on an island full of puzzles and artefacts. The lush visuals evoke *Myst*, but that game's inscrutability has been dialed back to far saner thresholds. The touchscreen remains adventure-game nirvana, and there's something immensely satisfying about reaching out to prod such gorgeous scenery. Meanwhile, cycling between seasons via magical statues offers just enough of a twist to make it feel unique.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



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What are games when they aren't being games?

In many ways, *Asura's Wrath* (p120) was inevitable. It was only a matter of time before a studio decided to build an entire experience around the QTE's ability to give a nominal sense of interactivity to sequences that would otherwise be disorienting or overly prescribed to control. And 'experience' is the key word – *Asura's Wrath* might be a piece of interactive entertainment, and it definitely contains traditional morsels of gameplay, but some would question a brawler that contains more cutscenes than brawling.

Journey (p112), however, feels like less of an inevitably. For starters, it's got a jump button, which – as Mario will tell you – is fairly gamey. At any rate, its ratio of interactivity to cutscenes is more typical. But there's no way to 'lose', and no real incentive to master its mechanics. It's a three-hour walk (or float) through a beautiful world.



The debate about interactivity was recently reopened by *Dear Esther*, and like that title *Journey* and *Asura's Wrath* will fire the imaginations of some players and leave others utterly cold (probably more than a few in *Asura's* case). Some may even be frightened that a hobby built on a solid bedrock of gameplay loops, carefully crafted systems and responsive interactions is being eroded by the artistic ambitions of studios more interested in narrative, ambience and maintaining authorial control than letting players play.

But does there need to be a debate at all? Whatever its creators' ambitions, no single game can offer a blueprint for the medium's future – only one part of it. And if all games were built around addictive, score-chasing game loops, we'd be the poorer for it. If *Journey* offered Goombas to stomp, in other words, it wouldn't be *Journey*. Its limitations, however you respond to them, are central to the game.

Mass Effect 3

Publisher EA
Developer BioWare
Format PS3, 360, PC
Release Out now

The galaxy's at war. Three chapters in, and the weight of numerous entangling plot strands has come crashing down on BioWare's universe. The genocidal Reapers have torn through non-Citadel space, arriving at Earth just in time for Commander Shepard's last-ditch attempt to get Alliance forces to heed her (or his) warnings. Cerberus, meanwhile, has finally shown its true colours, with the affably evil Martin Sheen making a sinister power play of his own. And as for the Krogan, the Turians, the Salarians, the Quarians and the Asari? Rest assured that two games' worth of simmering inter-species rivalry and intra-species political issues are about to come to an angry, spitting boil.

In other words, ignore EA's absurd claim that this is "the beginning, the middle, and the end" of the *Mass Effect* series, because it's precisely one-third right. Despite the presence of newbie squadmate James Vega (redeemed from Jacob levels of dullness by Freddie Prinze, Jr) attempting to provide a fresh pair of eyes for beginners, this is undeniably a third and final act. BioWare's gutsy decision to kick off with the galaxy-wide invasion in the opening minutes only reinforces a breathless pace that really doesn't have any patience for first-time players lagging behind and wondering exactly who a clutch of returning characters are supposed to be.

That war trickles down into every aspect of *Mass Effect 3*. Scanning has been reimagined as a panicky rush through Reaper-controlled systems. Tap the scan button and the Normandy will send out a pulse that highlights planets with supplies, but also draws the attention of nearby Reaper forces. The first and second games' civilian locations are mostly absent, meetings with key NPCs now take place on the Normandy (giving a suitably dramatic war-room feel, but coming at the cost of planetside hubs), while the missions drop you straight into the action. And although the sidequests still offer the same bite-sized chunks of universe-building sidestories and action they have done in past games, here they've been turned towards a grander purpose. In *Mass Effect 3*, everything you do earns supplies, troops and allies that feed into a metric measuring your readiness for war.

It's a setup that requires a stricter primary questline than *Mass Effect 1* and *2*. Whereas the first two titles would – once introductions were out of the way – hand players a selection of missions and then let them approach them in the order they saw fit, *Mass Effect 3* dictates its order of events. This, inevitably, makes for a much stronger sense of dissonance between the momentum of its primary plot and the myriad distractions it offers alongside it. Many RPGs are guilty of this, of course, but it's something that *Mass Effect 2* – which saw the BioWare team-building structure become the entire point of Shepard's mission – for the most part managed to elegantly avoid.

This latest chapter offers some of the most difficult dilemmas we've faced since the ambiguities of Alpha Protocol



The missions here retain the *Mass Effect 2* model of solid shooting interspersed with decision-packed dialogue trees. The problem is, it's a model that can't quite live up to the promise of all-out galactic war. Despite the best efforts of level design keen to show off giant Reapers stomping over the horizon, and skyboxes that flicker with mass accelerator fire, missions feel tight and boxy. And their hub-and-spoke or plain old corridor design is definitely better suited to interiors than *Mass Effect 3*'s attempts at land battles.

One early mission sends you from a central hub containing a key NPC into three cramped skirmishes with Reaper forces, and by the end you'll be feeling less thrilled than fatigued. Add in a few too many instances where you're asked to fire from a mounted turret or to pilot a giant mech, and it's hard not to come away with the sense you're playing a second-rate *Gears Of War*. That said, the game's improved melee abilities do patch a hole in Shepard's arsenal, making for smoother transitions between long- and close-range combat scenarios and dovetailing devastatingly with the vanguard class's ability to teleport straight into enemies' faces in the blink of an eye.

Fortunately, *Mass Effect* has always been about its detailed universe, and the choices you make within it. In that sense, this latest chapter offers some of the most difficult moral dilemmas we've faced since the ambiguities of *Alpha Protocol*. Much of its success lies with what appears to be a mild rethink of renegade Shepard. There are still traces of angry petulance, and opportunities to be cruel or sadistic for no good reason, but the comedic reporter-punching moments of the previous games have been (mostly) tuned down in favour of 'evil' options that represent nothing more than a realist's pragmatism. Frequently demanding that players weigh up personal sense of obligation to teammates against the good of the galaxy, *Mass Effect 3* will at times sorely trouble players who have taken a morally upstanding route through the series thus far. It might even make them question what a morally upstanding route truly is. And while the most interesting choices have been reserved for the primary questline, the sidequests have also benefited. Since they're no longer self-contained, you'll be going through many with a careful eye on the outcomes that will maximise your effectiveness in the war effort, or you'll be gleefully choosing to disregard them.

It's a third and final chapter, then, with all that implies. It's off-putting to new players, too busy tying up loose ends to dangle any threads of its own, and fails to stand up as its own game in the same manner as its predecessors. But it's also a spectacular, powerfully imagined and dramatically involving final act to one of gaming's richest sci-fi sagas.

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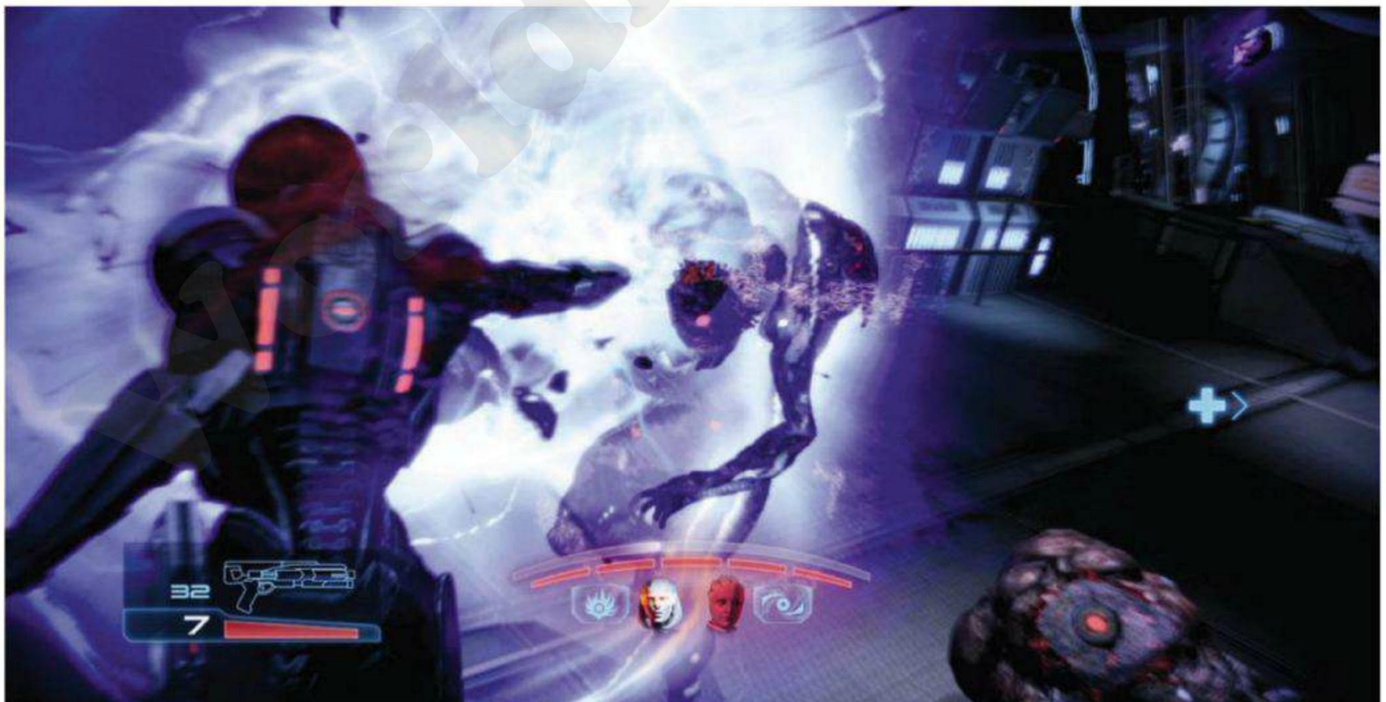


RIGHT Husks – organic beings zombified by the Reapers – appear in various species flavours. Batarians have been turned into heavy infantry, whereas Krogan transform into hulking brutes. **BELOW** The gunplay won't trouble *Uncharted* or *Gears Of War*, but the various powers give it a nuance of its own. Levelling is more complex than in *ME2*, but it hasn't quite returned to the first game's model





ABOVE Shepard's latest galactic trip takes in plenty of key homeworlds that until now have remained unseen. It also manages to squeeze in a return trip to locations of key significance from the series' earlier titles



Tech-leaning classes get to see Shepard's glowing orange omnitool morph into an alien-impaling spike. Biotics, however, must simply make do with this bright blue pulsing punch attack instead



Mass Effect 3's dialogue trees are as sprawling as ever, but its means of categorising morality still seems forced

Post Script

It may offer choice, but Mass Effect is still stuck in an ethical quandary

Paragon or renegade? The moral dichotomy offered by the *Mass Effect* series might appear more complex than a straight good/evil split, but in practice it's never quite worked. In terms of individual actions, BioWare is a master at offering choice. The fact that those choices are often polarised in the extreme – save the hostages, or kill them? – has only served to underline the freedom players are given.

But this also emphasises the fact that BioWare has never left the light side/dark side mentality of Star Wars behind. Paragon points, without fail, are the reward for decisions that show short-term compassion. By contrast, Renegade points tend to reward selfishness and domineering acts. The points distribution doesn't accommodate longterm intentions, though, which means that players aren't encouraged to consider them. The definitive moral dilemma of the first game was whether or not to free the Rachni Queen – the ruler of a once genocidal species who *might* not have been so genocidal after all. Freeing her was classified as Paragon – it is nice, after all – even though letting loose a potential genocide on a galaxy already under existential threat seems rather renegade to us.

The war context of *Mass Effect 3* has solved this to an extent. Now that BioWare no longer needs to delay the outcomes to decisions, players who keep the greater good in mind are rewarded – at the very least by a topping up of their readiness meter, but possibly through a visibly altered endgame. But this doesn't change the fact that as the situations and background fiction its writers spin become more richly complex, the series' morality becomes increasingly strained.

Mass Effect takes place in a universe in which humankind is new to galactic politics, and players can cast Shepard as either a collaborative ambassador (Paragon), or as a xenophobic upstart with a humanity-promoting agenda (Renegade). Renegade, pro-human dialogue options will be delivered with an aggressive snarl, and are often associated with other acts of moral dubiousness. The problem here, of course, lies in a blurring of Shepard's personal behaviour and his or her political aims. Why can't we play a racist who, for completely cynical reasons, is actually rather nice about it?

We could if the dialogue system didn't further reinforce the dichotomy. The first *Mass Effect* offered two distinct skill trees governing Shepard's persuasion skills: charm and intimidate. But while this seems a more sophisticated approach than a single 'persuade' tree, it narrows the options. There's little incentive to pump points into both and so players who want to talk their way through situations are forced to commit. The second and third games drop the skill tree, but instead create a self-perpetuating cycle whereby making enough Paragon or Renegade choices unlocks more of the respective options in dialogue.

This might sound negative, but it's a side effect of the expectations that BioWare raises. Players are deeply invested in *Mass Effect*'s lore, and when Shepard's actions don't seem entirely consistent – when the game doles out Renegade points (and the associated facial scarring) for choices made for ultimately noble reasons, or when players are encouraged to embody extremes rather than ambiguities – the ability to genuinely roleplay is lost.

It might be complex, but Dungeons & Dragons understands roleplaying, and has managed to develop a robust means of categorising morality. Its two axes, Good-Neutral-Evil and Lawful-Neutral-Chaotic, might lead to an unwieldy set of nine archetypes for game writers to deal with, but it is a game that knows a character's ethics and behaviour can be split apart. Replicating that in videogame form may be a challenge, but it offers the writers of BioWare's next saga an excellent place to start. ■

Alan Wake's American Nightmare

The original *Alan Wake* – set in the Twin Peaks-inspired small town of Bright Falls – showed a deft understanding of how psychological horror works. It lulled players into assuming its fictional setting had a cosy, real-world pulse, and then proceeded to unnerve them by sending increasingly violent distortions through it. Remedy may have abandoned its sandbox ambitions midway through development, but the act of building *Alan Wake*'s world as a coherent space made it emotionally believable even after it had been carved into slices. And it remains a laudable example of a story-driven game that balances open-world scope with the sculpted pacing of linear progression.

Rather than build on its predecessor's strengths, *American Nightmare*'s Story mode discards such wisdom. Whereas the wooded Bright Falls felt dense and vibrant, the desert of Night Springs feels like a barely furnished apartment. Each of the three areas hosts but a single NPC to dole out objectives, while flattening the yin and yang of the previous game's day-night cycle to unremitting dark eventually shifts the feel from life-threatening to just plain lifeless.

Still, Night Springs deserves credit for making a powerful first impression. Standing out from the darkness, a petrol station sits with its pumps bathed in a harsh fluorescent glow. The evocatively shabby Desert Shore Motel compels you like a winged insect towards its buzzing, flickering neon sign. But when you finally draw close, Night Springs starts to feel less like a world and more like a glorified film studio backlot.

It's a shame, but the game's sandbox – literally, given the desert setting – fails to amply reward your nosiness. Try to read a notice on the wall and you'll find illegible smears where text should be. Inspect the petrol station's price-per-gallon sign up close and it becomes a grainy garble. Periodicals littering a desktop have nothing decorating their covers but a few pastel columns. Perhaps it's due to the filesize limit, but the flow disruption of such contrivances feels like having somebody sitting a couple of rows behind you in the cinema loudly blow their nose every time the horror film you're watching starts to feel legitimately spooky.

If you want to read something that illuminates the story behind Night Springs, you'll have to settle for Wake's own thoughts, which are recorded in the collectible manuscript pages scattered about. These range from syrupy ruminations on friendship to awkward taxonomic breakdowns of the Taken menace. One passage describes the game's spider enemies as "part of the Dark Place's less significant fauna", proving nothing neuters supernatural horror like a professorial explanation. Of an astronomer NPC: "her social life would always play second fiddle to the mysteries of space". Dan Brown, eat your sacred heart out.

Publisher Microsoft
Developer Remedy Entertainment
Format XBLA
Release Out now

A clichéd time-loop premise, à la Groundhog Day, provides a thematic excuse for recycling the game's three map areas



FIGHT NIGHT
American Nightmare's combat feels more expansive than *Alan Wake*'s due to both its wider arsenal – the pneumatic, rapid-fire pop of the nailgun is a joy to wield – and the added variety of Taken species. For example, Splitters separate each time they're caught in the beam of your torch, leaving you to decide if you'd rather take on one overpowered Taken or a swarm of lesser threats. Muscular giants stomp about waving circular saws overhead. Our favourite is a ghoulish Taken that periodically leaps into the air, dissolving into a flock of Hitchcockian crows.

Remedy cultivates a B-movie grindhouse vibe in *American Nightmare*, and perhaps the tacky prose is intended to paint its novelist hero as a talentless hack. However, B-movies can be enjoyed ironically because they're unwittingly terrible. If *American Nightmare* is trying to manufacture that quality, it just comes off sounding like a mediocre localisation effort, too forced and stilted to be amusing.

Gameplay objectives are more fetching. At least, they involve more fetching. To accomplish the rewriting of reality that drives your progress, you must recreate the key circumstances described in certain manuscript pages. For example, if a manuscript page says that a Kasabian song was playing on the stereo at the moment of a key event, you'll find yourself in pursuit of the CD in question. A clichéd time-loop premise, à la Groundhog Day, provides a thematic excuse for recycling the game's three map areas – motel, observatory, drive-in – with negligible variations in each pass. One telling piece of voiceover narration describes Wake as "returning to the observatory, for what he hopes is the final time". You and us both.

You can forget puzzles too. *American Nightmare*'s lone traditional effort requires setting three electrical switches to a preordained pattern, but it turns from dreary to insulting when you realise Remedy has telegraphed the solution via three tiny glowing lights on the wall directly above them. At least the series' novel combat mechanic – wearing down the Taken's buffer of darkness with the beam of your torch, rendering them susceptible to weapon fire – feels as vital as ever. The delayed gratification of having to wait those extra seconds before unleashing a close-quarters shotgun blast provides a tantalising payoff. On a purely tactile level, it's the shooter equivalent of mashing the left trigger on a *Forza* turn, then releasing it to hammer down the right trigger in punchy, rhythmic succession.

With the bite-sized campaign clocking in at four to five hours, the meat of *American Nightmare* lies in its stellar arcade mode. As a ten-minute clock ticks down to sunrise, you score points by logging kills and successful dodges, while taking damage resets your multiplier. The action is so immediate and seductive that the lack of multiplayer doesn't feel like an outrage. Asynchronous leaderboard duels will suffice.

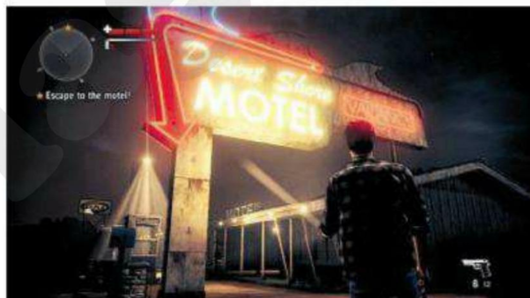
Originally dubbed Fight Till Dawn during preview glimpses, the mode appears to have been stripped of branding in the final release. It's now billed as Arcade Action, a beige shrug of a title presumably concocted by Wake himself. Our only other quibble is the strong-arm tactic of forcing you to unlock advanced weapon tiers by collecting manuscript pages in Story mode. It's a pity that Remedy seems intent on making you eat your soggy story vegetables before tucking into *American Nightmare*'s only real confection.

6



Even though the bulky Taken firefighters don't look outwardly monstrous, it can be unsettling to be attacked by a person whose occupation typically involves protecting people from danger





ABOVE The first location you come to after descending a canyon slope into the Arizona outpost of Night Springs is a roadside motel. From your first glimpse of the place, you just know there's a corpse in one of those rooms

ABOVE Finding the TVs strewn about offers live-action easter eggs featuring antagonist Mr Scratch, the Mr Hyde to Wake's Dr Jekyll. Finnish actor Ilkka Villi's portrayal is reminiscent of Christian Bale's performance in American Psycho – well executed, if sadistically corny. RIGHT A well-timed tap of the left shoulder button initiates Wake's bullet-time-style slow-motion dodge. The tactic proves extremely useful when these hulking ogres start trying to saw you in half



Post Script

Interview: Oskari Häkkinen, head of franchise development

Remedy's head of franchise development, **Oskari Häkkinen**, is a busy man now that *Alan Wake*'s back in the spotlight, with both a PC version of the original game finally on shelves and *American Nightmare* pushing the franchise into score-chasing arcade territory. He explains the challenges of condensing the *Alan Wake* experience down to fit the XBLA format.



How much did you have to scale back your ambitions for *American Nightmare* due to filesize constraints?
For an Xbox Live Arcade title, just *American Nightmare*'s arcade mode alone probably would've been enough to fetch a nice round 800 MS points. I think people would've been quite happy with that. But story's in our DNA as a studio, right? So we felt we needed to put a Story mode into it, because just having an Arcade Action mode wouldn't have made sense with the franchise. In terms of limitations, we've got a five-hour story, and you visit a set of key locations repeatedly, but experience them in a different flow each time. We tried to find a way of working within those limitations by using that kind of Groundhog Day approach.

Any other tricks you used to keep the filesize down?
We changed the level design a little bit. *Alan Wake* was a bit more linear, because making a thriller meant we had to take control of the setting more. Now, for *American Nightmare*, we've opened it up so we're utilising the open-world structure in having this hub level design where the players can choose in what order they do things. Because it's a lot less linear, there are fewer controlled audio cues and set-pieces. Open design is a lot more free, and that saved us quite a bit of space.

Did you consider weaving the character of Barry into the game beyond the easter eggs and his cameo?
Again, it comes down to the limitations we discussed earlier. When you're dealing with a key character such as Barry, you have to do it properly. When you introduce a new NPC or a new character, and they weren't seen in the previous game, their role is smaller than if you bring back one of the golden oldies, so to speak. You have to put a lot of work into getting Barry right...

Framing *American Nightmare*'s story as an episode of the Night Springs TV show gives you freedom to drop Wake into any setting. If you did another XBLA game of this sort, would you refresh the locale again?
I can say in all honesty that we haven't planned anything like that, but we do hope this is going to be popular and that it will cause people who maybe didn't play *Alan Wake* to go back and check out that game. Ultimately, we want to expand the franchise, but we'll let players vote with their wallets. If people love *American Nightmare* and want more of it, we'll definitely look at it, but we don't have any concrete plans.

"We felt we needed a story, because just having Arcade Action mode wouldn't have made sense with the franchise"



Given its similarity to wave-based survival modes, did you consider adding a multiplayer component?
No, not really. The Arcade Action mode is kind of a leap for us. It basically happened by accident and isn't something we would've consciously set out to do. It just grew out of a sandbox we created for testing out new weapons and enemy types, and then realised it was a ton of fun and we wanted to get it out there. Ultimately, we're a small team of about 60 people and our focus has always been on story and not on multiplayer. There's some really fantastic multiplayer out there – especially among the military shooters – but they are decreasing their focus on story... We'd rather put our team's focus on making a story that we're really proud of.

In terms of how you deliver that story, doesn't the format of the manuscript page strip out the interactivity that makes games unique?
We've said many times that we want to try to do something new and different in storytelling in games. After we finished *Max Payne 1* and 2, our creative director Sam Lake was literally banging his head against the wall, saying there must be a better way to tell stories in videogames than using a three-act movie-like structure. That works wonderfully in a film that's one to two hours, but doesn't work as well in a videogame, because it gets diluted over the course of 10, 15, 20 hours. Around the time we were making *Alan Wake*, you had great TV shows like Lost coming out, with episodes connecting to an overarching story. That's when it hit Sam that episodic structure is the way to go. We also like to use live-action, we like to use TVs and radios in addition to the manuscript pages. We're constantly thinking of how to take those elements forward.

Alan Wake is a calm, mild-mannered novelist who also happens to be handy with a broad range of munitions. Do you think storytelling in games is crippled by the reliance on shooting mechanics?
We do try to explore relationships as well. You saw it a little bit in both Max Payne and Alan Wake's friendship with Barry, in terms of how relationships drive the protagonist. But at the end of the day videogames are interactive, and especially for our games, because we've always wanted to do action games... action generally means guns. It's an interesting question and I'd be interested to hear other people explore it. What else could players do in a videogame that would keep them entertained? ■

Syndicate

Publisher EA
Developer Starbreeze
Format 360 (version tested), PS3, PC
Release Out now

First, put your nostalgia aside and accept the fact that while this may bear the *Syndicate* name, it has nothing to do with Bullfrog's early-'90s tactical cult classic. The story elements are there: this is a future of mega-corporations, not nation states; a time of widespread human enhancement; a society with haves and have-nots. But in 2012, this storyline feels more like a hand-me-down from *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* than a defining feature of this series. Tactical elements, meanwhile, are almost entirely absent. Strategy in *Syndicate* boils down to one simple question: in which order are you going to shoot the bad guys?

In terms of its structure and mechanics, this FPS is generic as they come. You have two weapons (plus grenades), recharging health and there's a rudimentary cover mechanic. You will fight your way through linear levels that are punctuated by boss encounters. You will pull switches and reroute power lines. You will kill heavily armoured, minigun-lugging brutes before turning their firearm on a pack of unfortunates who happen to be lagging a minute or so behind. You will secure objectives before heading for extraction. In other words, you'll do nothing that you haven't done before.

You're unlikely to have done it in this much style, though. Despite a trickle of staff heading off to work at Machinegames during development, there's still an unmistakably Starbreeze quality to *Syndicate*. It's a quality defined by the bobbing head of your corporate agent, Miles Kilo, when he breaks into a run; by the jerkily physical way he hauls himself up ladders at speed; and by the ear-splitting sound of shotgun blasts. No studio captures sheer physical presence in a firstperson avatar like Starbreeze, and in that specific respect *Syndicate* outclasses everything but Starbreeze's own *Chronicles Of Riddick* titles. If you have even a passing interest in shooters, then you may well have stood on the back of a moving train while shooting at a buzzing gunship before, but it hasn't felt like this.

And unlike the *Riddick* games, there's an extra layer of fizzling, crackling technology that's layered over Kilo's physical presence. The nano-chips that drive the plot of *Syndicate* also power its action, providing one of the most elegantly overlaid HUDs since *Dead Space*, while also offering players a range of 'breaching applications' that allow them to temporarily stun or incapacitate foes. Of these, using Backfire will see up to three enemies' guns explode in their hands, Persuade will turn one enemy to your side before he turns his gun on himself, while Suicide will cause a foe to whip out a grenade and detonate it. But the problem with these apps is that their ultimate ends are too alike – all offer a quickfire way to distract or damage multiple foes, all recharge relatively quickly (albeit at varying speeds) and the occasion will simply never arise where it's worth choosing between them. The result is that the one element of the game that draws most on the series' tactical heritage is little more than an extra attack button. Yes, later enemies turn up encased in armour that must be breached and take a little longer to kill, but they're no more interesting to fight.

While the world has been grittily realised, your route through it is haphazard, with levels often steering you into dead ends



It's left to Kilo's ability to simultaneously slow down time and see through walls – activated with a tap of the right bumper – to enliven the shooting. And it does, despite the obvious debt to *FEAR*. Starbreeze wisely throws enough enemies at you that being able to see them coming is a necessity, not a luxury, and dipping in and out of your heightened reflexes gives a genuinely satisfying rhythm to combat. Weapons themselves are punchy, but mostly familiar, although a wall-penetrating assault rifle can be combined with Kilo's in-built X-ray vision to devastating effect.

Combat aside, there's little else to hold your interest. The setting is third-hand Blade Runner, and the story is confused. Brian Cox – of *Killzone*, Bourne and X-Men fame – turns in a typically charismatic performance as your syndicate head, but the plot revels too much and too early on in the moral dubiousness of Kilo's work, sucking dry the empathy needed to respond to later twists with anything other than a vague sense of curiosity. And while the world has been grittily realised, your route through it is haphazard, with level design frequently steering you into dead ends and locked doors as you try to find your next encounter.

This is less of an issue in the co-op mode, where smaller, tighter levels tend to ensure your four-man team all know where they're going. Missions are simple fetch quests for the most part, seeing you push into the bases of rival syndicates before emerging, five minutes later, clutching hard drives packed with valuable data. But despite the simple objectives, the metagame provides a genuinely strategic element that's absent in the campaign, since class choices and wide-ranging upgrade paths give you the scope to craft an agent whose skillset will balance those of your friends. Bulk up the amount of time you can stay in visor mode, for instance, and you'll become an even more effective sniper. The mission design fails to make allowances for when you bring less than three comrades along, though, necessitating a return trip to bag any remaining drives.

There are times when *Syndicate* threatens to become a less typical game. Some missions begin as noirish stakeouts, or see you exploring an enemy base while disguised, and it seems for a moment that Starbreeze's ability to embody players within an avatar might be turned to a more ambitious cause than merely making for extra-thrilling gunplay. But it's never long before the shooting begins. It's good shooting, of course, pulled off with the studio's signature style, but it's come at the cost of *Syndicate*'s imagination and ambition. **6**

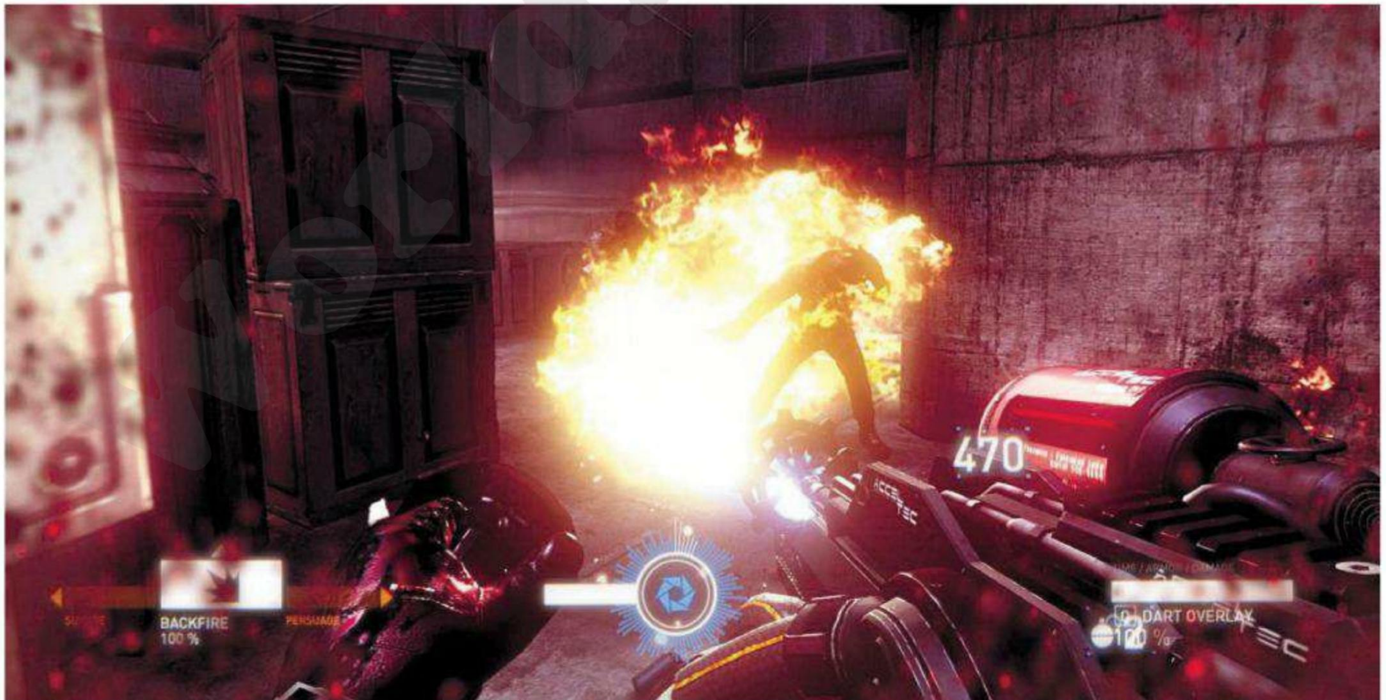
RIGHT Firstperson story segments punctuate the action. On occasion you might be called upon to answer a button prompt, but otherwise they're non-interactive, bar your ability to walk slowly. **BELOW** Tutorials take place in a VR world generated by the AI in Kilo's datachip, which also happens to talk to him in soothing tones while it spurs him on to commit murder



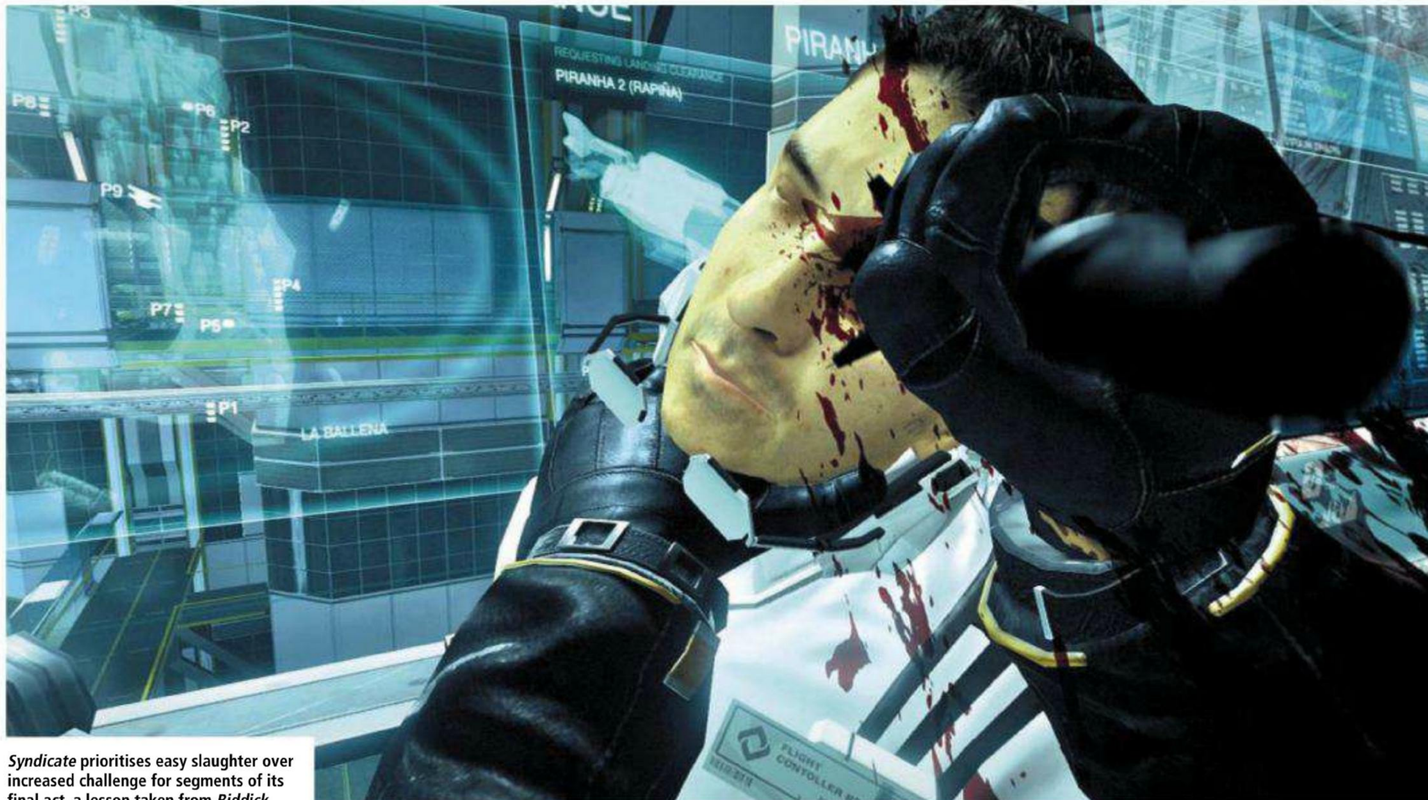




ABOVE It might be a little tired after *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, but the vision of a world ruled by biotech corporations is still a striking one, and Starbreeze has brought it to life with its signature style and panache



The integration of HUD and gameplay in *Syndicate* is the neatest example since *Dead Space*, although the flickering distortion of Kilo's visor has a habit of kicking in at the least opportune times



Syndicate prioritises easy slaughter over increased challenge for segments of its final act, a lesson taken from *Riddick*

Post Script

How Syndicate aims to augment your experience with an easy final act

We died in *Syndicate*, but it's not particularly hard. Its checkpoints are leniently spaced. Its bosses are cheap, but quickly become predictable. With the exception of the extended sequence in which your agent's powers are rendered useless by the presence of enemies without hackable chips in their brain stems, we rarely found ourselves stuck for more than a couple of minutes. But traditionally it's the last few levels of an FPS that offer its stiffest challenge, so we approached *Syndicate*'s final battle through a company skyscraper ready for a frustrating, stop-start challenge.

We needn't have worried, because *Syndicate* has learnt more from the *Riddick* games than how to make a character's head bob believably. *The Chronicles Of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay* might have suffered from a bloated middle act, but it knew how to stage a finale. Sticking Riddick in a suit of power armour and letting him stomp through the prison he'd previously had to stalk about might have ignored the standard difficulty curve, but it made for climactic scenes more memorable than the boss battle that followed.

Syndicate doesn't put players in a suit of armour. Instead, it achieves a sense of finale through carefully staged level design, stacking the odds in the player's favour without entirely removing the possibility that you may be overwhelmed in a set-piece that starts off challenging, but swiftly becomes an excuse to grandstand with breaching applications and time-slowing powers.

The room in which the action takes place is the kind oversized warehouse-cum-hangar space traditionally favoured by level designers who are eager to give players and NPCs room to manoeuvre. It's spacious, brightly lit, and the walls are lined with elevators. Before long, enemies begin to pour in from all sides. For the first five minutes, it's a tough, taut shootout, forcing players to juggle breaching abilities by keeping an eye on recharging meters while also tracking enemies as they dive in and out of cover.

And then it slows down. Rather than finishing when the action's at its peak, the set-piece continues, as latecomers dribble out of elevators, their arrival flagged seconds in advance by flashing red lights that signal the door from which they'll emerge. The gap between waves increases as well, ensuring that the next round of foes will almost always come face to face with a player bristling with fully recharged breaching tech. Factor in the manner of their arrival – tightly packed into cramped elevator compartments – and the game's final few encounters are even more ludicrously one-sided, simply naked setups for scenes of slow-motion slaughter. The point of all this, in other words, isn't to offer players a hair-tearing final challenge to overcome. It's to make them feel like the most dangerous man in the building at the game's most dramatic point. The fact that mere moments later Starbreeze offers players a breachable UAV for the first time – a floating gun turret that can be hacked to aid your cause – isn't a coincidence. Instead, the studio is loading the odds in your favour to communicate that your powers are at a peak.

Half-Life 2 did something similar, of course, by putting the Super Gravity Gun in Gordon Freeman's hands and letting him tear his way through City 17's Citadel. All these games prioritise the drama of their final act over the difficulty of their final challenge. More importantly, they also trust their mechanics to satisfy players even when adversity is taken away from victory. It's telling that, as with *Escape From Butcher Bay*, the final boss of *Syndicate* is a perfunctory affair, awkwardly wedged between the action that precedes it and the final pieces of exposition that follow. It's a bottleneck where traditional design expectations rub awkwardly against Starbreeze's ability to conjure a sense of thrilling conclusion without them. ■

Journey

Journey is an experience that – like Dan Pinchbeck's ghost story, *Dear Esther* – pushes at the boundaries of what you consider to be a game. There's an objective of sorts: a mountain looms over the horizon whenever your shawl-covered wanderer is outside. But bar the odd collectible, there are few distractions from this pilgrimage, little in the way of mechanics to learn, and only the most cursory of puzzles to solve. *Journey* doesn't really want to be played. It certainly doesn't want to be mastered. It wants to be experienced. And, most importantly, it wants to be shared.

Dropped in a desert littered with the relics of a lost civilisation, your armless character can interact with the world around them by one simple means: a shout that's activated by holding down the circle button. Shouts can activate dormant features of the wastes, such as fluttering ribbons that emerge from weathered, wind-worn cages. In turn, these ribbons will power up your character's jump, allowing you to float from structure to structure and across the sands.

Like *Flower*, then, *Journey* sees you return a life of sorts to a land long dead, but this is a less abstract game than thatgamecompany's previous title. There's story in these sands, the broad strokes of which are provided by the silent cutscenes that end each chapter, while the details can be found in the levels themselves if you know what to look for. And this stronger sense of narrative has been tied to a three-act structure that may repeat *Flower*'s emotional arc beat for beat, but does so with an occasionally startling power.

Journey is a short game, but no two of its sequences are alike. Weaving giant cloth bridges across a ruin-strewn plain; sliding haphazardly across sparkling, sugary pink sands; frolicking with a pack of dolphin-like magic carpets – all of this happens within the first half-hour. The events that happen beyond this point are best experienced unspoilt by prior knowledge, so we won't reference them here, but do keep an eye out for a spectacular sequence that takes place during a burnt-orange sunset. It's one of many spellbinding sights in a beautiful game, whose cartoonish, faintly eastern art style is frequently coupled with imaginative level design to astounding effect.

And while the business of actually controlling your wayfarer lacks the purity of *Flower*'s motion inputs, it does keep the gently empowering sense of reward. Getting the hang of the floating jump can result in wonderful displays of airborne grace, but there's no real fail state, so you can fumble the odd leap. There is a way, however, to easily keep your pilgrim's jump powered up and ready, and that's to make a friend.

Journey's co-op component is a symbol of, and justification for, thatgamecompany's stripped-back approach to design. You can't invite a friend to play with you. You can't see your partner's username. There's definitely no party chat. There's just you, and whomsoever you meet on the road. *Dark Souls* recently demonstrated the power of locking online play down more tightly within a game's fiction. *Journey* does the same, and then throws away the key.

Publisher SCE
Developer thatgamecompany
Format PS3
Release Out now

Being cut free from lobbies, or even something as deliberate as *Dark Souls*' summons, makes linking up with another player feel like an act of random magical happenstance – you might hear their shouts before you see them, or they could rush upon you all of a sudden. This desert isn't the bustling metropolis of an MMOG, it's barren and empty, and *Journey* ensures you'll never see more than one other traveller at a time.

> Being cut free from lobbies makes linking up with another player feel like an act of random magical happenstance

Having a partner is functionally useless (shouting may power up one another's jumps, but you can get everywhere alone) and yet it is utterly central to *Journey*'s appeal. This is a game of discovery, and its power is amplified immeasurably by having those discoveries shared. Without any way to communicate other than that shout, breaking character is impossible, which makes *Journey* a rare example of an online game in which the presence of other players makes for a more absorbing, more atmospheric experience. And there's a bittersweet touch to the co-op, too, absent when you journey alone. Without the safety net of usernames and invites, your online interactions take on a fleeting poignancy. When a new-found traveller falls behind you'll wait, and when you lose sight of them you'll panic, because the price of losing track of them is never meeting up again (although your shouts are accompanied by symbols that assist, slightly, with identification). Later journeys might see you take the role of kindly teacher, nudging your wide-eyed new recruit along the right path, but you'll only get one chance to discover *Journey*, so make sure it's shared.

The flaws, such as they are, are niggling. The presence of collectible glyphs and hidden tapestries add a faint collect 'em all mentality to a game that's better without them – *Journey*'s environments feel like they're designed to pass by in a dreamlike haze, not to be scoured for content. And some players will bemoan its relative brevity, coupled with the lack of incentive the game gives them to return. The problem with building a game around the magic of discovery is that it's a one-time enchantment.

But *Journey*'s real issue, if it has one, goes much deeper than that. It's a resolutely linear game in which your range of interactions is minimal. For some, that will make it a pretty but hollow novelty; boring, perhaps. But for those who play games to explore strange lands, see beautiful sights and to immerse themselves – for however brief a time – in a new world, *Journey* is perfect. And what's more, they'll find someone like them to share it with.

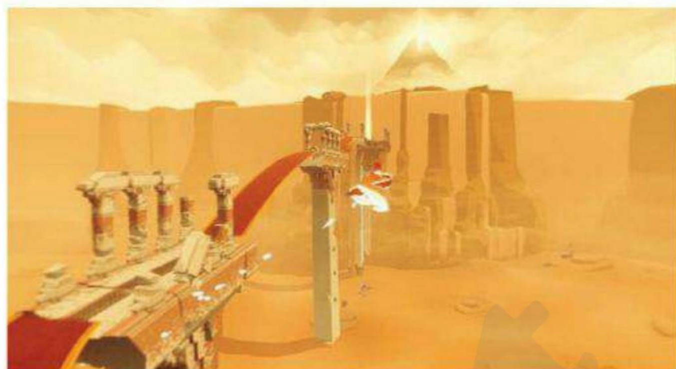
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SOUND TREK
Journey's soundtrack is note-perfect. It often strikes a gently elegiac quality, but the score knows when to recede into the background, and does so often enough that you never come away with the impression of being manipulated or told how to feel. On occasion, it disappears, foregrounding the gentle trudge of your wanderer through the sands, or the harsh winds of a sandstorm blowing across the dunes. There are, however, no player-generated, *Flower*-like musical moments, such as the ones that you caused by sweeping through a chain of posies.



ABOVE Hold circle and these fluttery scraps will lift your traveller high into the air – powering up your jump at the same time. It's about as 'gamey' a mechanic as *Journey* offers; like *Flower*, this is simple to play







ABOVE The various cloth creatures (clearly made from the same material as your wanderer) have been filled with a character that defies their lack of features. These tiny scraps behave exactly like a flock of birds or school of fish. **LEFT** While pre-release footage and shots have focused on the desert stage, *Journey*'s later levels change location entirely. Interiors show off some weirdly complex architecture, and also see the introduction of an unexpected gameplay twist

Binary Domain

Publisher Sega
Developer In-house (Yakuza Studio)
Format 360 (tested), PS3
Release Out now

There's a recurring question perplexing the denizens of *Binary Domain*'s dystopian future: am I one of a kind, or a factory-line clone? That's because they live in a world where robots in disguise walk among men, often unaware of their true nature. It's also a question to ask of the game, since it repeatedly ticks cover-shooter boxes – aping *Gears Of War*'s roadie runs, cover system, weapon slots and overly muscled archetypes – while only occasionally throwing design curveballs that hit and miss with equal measure.

As burly 'Rust Crew' soldier Dan Marshall, it's your mission to infiltrate near-future Japan to discover the truth behind the robot menaces being discovered all over the globe. You start off on Tokyo's shoreline and work your way through the lower segment of the city towards its upper echelons – the latter of which are exclusively occupied by the healthy and rich – in search of the scientific mind behind all the madness. The first problem with this premise is that it forces you to endure an opening couple of hours set in the drab, dreary doldrums of the future. An interlude set in the underground, yakuza-run Shibuya district brightens up proceedings, though, and the script starts to crackle and pop with characters more colourful than your core team members. In fact, your comrades, with the exception of a neckerchief-sporting 'good' robot, are little more than national stereotypes, all snotty Brits and boisterous yanks. Such clichés wouldn't normally devastate your expectations in a cover shooter, but *Binary Domain*'s emphasis on dialogue exchanges – performed either via unreliable voice control or button shortcuts – adds extra disappointment to these flat characterisations.

At various stages in the lean eight-hour campaign, you also have the choice of which squadmates you want by your side. Characters inhabit the usual classes – a sniper, a heavy, a demolitions expert – but it's who as much as what they are that dictates the flow of *Binary Domain*'s chapters. Your interactions with the AI, giving accolades or cursing the day they were born, affects a character's trust meter. Push them too far and they might not back you up in battle; love too strongly and they might see through your charade. It's an unpredictable, shallow system that never feels reliable. Worse still, your attitude has little sway on milestone events. You might act like a fool for three chapters, but if it's Marshall's turn to be heroic in the scheme of the narrative, you'll be playing the hero whether you like it or not. The fact that he's a predefined character, with his own quips and personality, only further serves to remove your sense of input. Marshall is no Commander Shepard, no blank slate for you to mould like *Mass Effect*'s star, and it damages the game's attempt to make you a key player in its unfolding, rigidly plotted yarn.

Once you've forgiven the empty promise of the tame trust system, you can begin to enjoy the punchy pace of the action. For an outfit largely unversed in the genre, Yakuza Studio has managed to strike a fine balance of weapons, environment design and a captivating canon of enemy types. Infantry-grade robots are just the start of your woes, because athletic 'Shinobi' squads, animal-themed bosses and airborne threats will all come into play. Certain bosses can be a little too agile for the clunky movement of your beefcake boy scout, however, while the on-rails sections do little to the light fires of excitement as you chug through boxes of readily available, or purchasable, ammo.

Once you've forgiven the empty promise of the tame trust system, you can begin to enjoy the punchy pace of the action

Your limited squad commands (attack, retreat, take cover and so on) aren't essential in the context of the game's generally casual difficulty curve, but if you've treated your buddies well, it's handy to be able to fall back on them for a revival when you're down or a flank when you're pinned. Keeping your team well-equipped proves more crucial than keeping them happy, and you frequently need to access shop terminals littered (a little too liberally) around stages to keep their medkits stocked up for optimal performance. If you lose a team member, it's game over.

Binary Domain's surprises don't leap from its clichéd narrative, but rather from short breaks in all the running and gunning, such as a jet-ski sewer ride, a mech shootout and some *Uncharted*-style cinematic escapes. As scripted and linear as these moments are, they release you from the grip of cover-shooter monotony and keep you guessing what new tricks the usually ambitious Yakuza Studio will try next. Sadly, there's little beyond these small nuggets of variety to savour, and the game avoids some glaring opportunities to mimic the minigame-dense, character-rich sensibilities of the studio's *Yakuza* titles.

Multiplayer is a mixed bag, offering a limited number of maps with a few standout worthwhile modes. The Invasion match type (read: Horde) offers a calamitous, claustrophobic 50-wave firefight for you and your friends to brave. It takes careful strategy and character selection to survive even the first dozen waves, and it manages to distil the very best of *Binary Domain*'s action into its selection of miniature maps (albeit ones made of areas and assets that have been copied and pasted from the campaign).

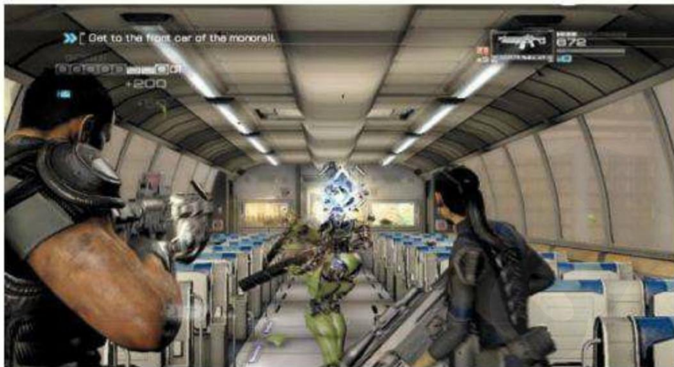
When the curtain drops on *Binary Domain*, you're left with the sense that, while accomplished, this game is largely a rote exercise in genre. It adequately, but not outstandingly, mimics the nuts and bolts of the western cover shooter, while bringing little new of worth to the table. In an ironic – or perhaps knowing – parallel to its subject matter, *Binary Domain* marks the moment that a Japanese team has managed to mechanically clone its competition. But, as with any clone, it's ended up feeling a little soulless. **6**



I, FAUX-BOT
The story is a mishmash of ideas you've seen elsewhere – the robots are straight out of Alex Proyas' Will Smith-starring I, Robot movie; the tiered city a nod to Mega-City One – and while the plot engages, it never truly grips. Downtime for you to wander *Binary Domain*'s environments is disappointingly restrictive, allowing you a few minor interactions with local citizens but nothing more. It's a shame, because this is a game that has a distinct sense of place, a reminder that it's from the same people who conjured up the vibrant, violent Kamurocho in the *Yakuza* series.



Baton-wielding bots waste no time in getting up close and personal with Marshall and his cohorts. Naturally, knowing which tactics to employ on the various enemy types is essential for success





ABOVE The pace of *Binary Domain* could be compared to an inverted *Yakuza* – there's a constant baseline of violence broken by quiet times, whereas *Yakuza* peppered its solitude with flashes of nose breaking

ABOVE A brief interlude set aboard a bullet train is one of *Binary Domain*'s tightest set-pieces, drawing together snack-size moments of character interaction and close-quarters shootouts. **RIGHT** Marshall is capable of giving as good as he gets, possessing a killer right-hook attack that can get you out of trouble quickly



SSX

At the turn of the millennium, the original *SSX* kicked off EA BIG's run of high-quality egocentric sports titles, paving the way for the punishing thrills of *NFL Street* and the showboating silliness of *NBA Street*. The extreme snowboarding sim was the most universally accessible and embraced of the stable, delivering incrementally more ambitious sequels that didn't stray too far from the original formula of big stunts, bold environments and solid mechanics. The outfits were eccentric, but the gameplay was robust – a happy marriage of style and function.

The void left by *SSX* since its prior outing in 2008 has been slowly filled by a shift toward the realism pioneered by EA's own *Skate*, a response to the increasingly gimmicky takes on extreme sports by brands such as *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*. It's interesting, then, to find EA partially resorting back to zany form for this latest entry, albeit with a greater sense of mortality to your powder trip and a few pages taken from *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit*'s online playbook.

The campaign, taking in 'deadly descents' across real-world locations such as Patagonia and the Antarctic, also serves as a tutorial for the game's big ideas. Alongside the expected score attacks and races, there are now challenges that involve the likes of oxygen meters, wingsuits and ice picks. Such inconsistent variables dilute the series' simple thrills as often as they enhance them. Headlamp-based runs in the dark are particularly frustrating, because your spins and tricks disorient your field of view. But when one of these ideas works, it really works: gliding freefalls in wingsuits and the reverse-camera avalanche stages are thrilling bite-size blasts of originality.

Yet this new *SSX*'s most ambitious design decision – giving you the power to rewind time – also proves its most damaging. Hold down the left bumper (you have limited uses in certain challenges) and you'll be dragged back through the slopes or from the abyss to take another stab at hitting that perfect trick or racing line. Effectively, then, you're given limited 'lives' or respawns in certain scenarios, rather than God-like control of the flow of a race. Fellow competitors continue in realtime as you meddle with history, giving you a strong motive to not to slip off each track's many edges, since using your ability means losing ground to the enemy.

It's a concept that's worked well in other games, from *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* to *Race Driver: GRID*, but here it feels like a concession to stages that are too unpredictable to conquer first time out the gate and too sprawling to memorise. All too often, you'll plunge unavoidably to your death and be forced to rewind with icy-grave-given hindsight. It neuters the thrill of reading the slopes, of feeling your way along the ridges and speedily changing your tack on the fly.

Publisher EA
Developer In-house (Canada)
Format 360 (tested), PS3
Release Out now

It's brimming with content, both online and off, but SSX has some pressing issues hampering its high aims



It gives the track designers an excuse to be cruel, too, where previous games were kind and offered plentiful opportunities to pick your mark and grind it. *SSX* at its soaring best was about empowerment, not punishment.

Another blemish is *SSX*'s charmless campaign narrative, which ties the cast together and provides shallow doses of backstory. The game's villain, Griff, is a defecting member of SSX, and his attempt to overthrow the gang's kudos on the slopes supposedly provides your motivation for conquering each peak. It's harmless filler, but the wafer-thin story can't paper over the fact that the entire campaign is little more than a tutorial and challenge mode. While you'll earn credits by besting the story's slopes to spend on better, flashier equipment, the whole affair is a slight offering that can also prove confusing, given it uses the same map layout as the meat of the *SSX* meal: Explore mode.

Explore is a packed spread, with over 100 challenges and the option of competing in asynchronous high-score competitions against online rivals. 'Ridernet' is EA Canada's take on *Need For Speed*'s Autolog, providing an accessible social networking vibe to the experience. Pop-up messages announce when friends smash your records, and you're offered the chance to hop immediately into said challenge, giving plenty of opportunities for one-upmanship. Global Events encourage more traditional realtime competition, but with an odd dislocation from fellow players: you can't physically clash with rivals. This renders it a sort of live ghost mode rather than a true battle. The dearth of straight-up matchmaking options is glaring (if you're aping Autolog, why not go all the way?) but partly compensated for by the option to set parameters – such as gear loadouts – for rivals to compete within.

Yes, *SSX* is brimming with content, both online and off, but it has some pressing issues hampering its high aims. Building up your trick points to enter a Zen-like Super Tricky state with unlimited boost and some fantastic character-specific tricks unleashes a flurry of fan-pleasing madness, but these moments are hard-earned and fleeting, rather than the game's heart and soul. The real-world locations seem to have stunted some of the brand's trademark extravagances, too, with *SSX* now inhabiting an awkward space between realist and comic-book aesthetics. For each moment of sweeping scale, there's a bland, repetitive cave run or prolonged rail grind. The palette is almost as defined by steel blues and mud browns as it is by dazzling fluorescent gear and shining whites.

In looking outside itself for inspiration, *SSX* has found a worthy infrastructure to establish an online community and culture. But this same approach has found the brand veering away from some of the fun and fireworks of yesteryear, leaving its more seductive silly side out in the cold.

5





ABOVE The option to use the right analogue stick for throwing down tricks in *SSX* can't help but remind you of EA's own *Skate* franchise, which has a more nuanced and satisfying system of intricate tricking and grinding





ABOVE Dropping into challenges, often from great height, is a heady thrill. And the tutorial takes place in freefall from a helicopter, giving an even greater sense of vertigo. It's a neat twist on the standard approach to learning the basics. LEFT The mixture of exaggerated physics, feather-light characters and some dodgy collision equates to an experience in which you never feel like your avatar really belongs in the sprawling, often realistically modelled environments

I Am Alive

For many, survival horror's heyday came during videogaming's 32bit era, a time when technical limitations contributed to the sense of fear and foreboding as often as proactive design. The early *Resident Evil* games robbed players of a sense of precision and power with their disorienting control schemes, ensuing hand-eye coordination was as much an enemy as a rabid Doberman. Meanwhile, *Silent Hill* would have been a far less disturbing experience were it not for the heavy fog that cloaked the town, shrouding the twin terrors of monster and draw distance.

I Am Alive achieves a similar effect by choosing a post-apocalyptic metropolis for its location, a city ravaged by earthquakes that's all crumbled skyscrapers, twisted girders and endless dust. At the root level of the city, the dust cloys and blinds, depleting stamina and robbing survivors of hope. High up, around the decaying skeletons of merchant banks and insurance company towers, the dust desaturates the skies, robbing the world of colour and form, just as the tremors below strip it yet further of its original topography.

You play as a stubbled survivor who's as athletic as Nathan Drake. But unlike *Uncharted*'s derring-do explorer, you're handicapped by a stamina bar that limits the amount of time you can spend clambering across the debris. Survival horrors are so often about managing resources in extreme circumstances. In *I Am Alive*, your gun rarely has more than a single bullet in its chamber and your backpack is often home to little more than a pack of painkillers and a bottle of water, but the real resource to be managed is energy.

As you climb and run, so the bar at the top of the screen empties, replenishing only when you plant both feet on solid ground and rest. If the bar empties before you have a chance to recover, then the gauge begins to shrink, unable to return to its previous maximum without the aid of restorative items. This means that every walk from pillar to post must be planned, and rest points need to be searched out before you embark upon your next journey into the dust.

Your motivation is to be reunited with your family, and the hunt begins back at your apartment, from which they were evacuated 12 months ago. But information pertaining to their whereabouts is hard won, because the citizens of Haventon have become accustomed to their city's degradation. Setting the game one year after the apocalypse means that those few survivors who live in its world have settled into an uncivilised kind of existence. They've marked out their territories, daubed warning slogans on the walls of appropriated malls, and now guard their bin fires with rusty pistols. Few will help you. Most will try to rob and kill you.

I Am Alive introduces nuance and tension to these encounters by having enemies react to your movements. Approach a man whose weapon is raised and he'll fire into your face at point-blank range. Walk away and he'll scream "Good riddance!" after you, a low tone of relief to his spitting bravado. You can also put your hands up to feign surrender to muscle-men who stride toward you in anger, then slice their necks with your knife as they lean in to intimidate you. And raising a gun, even if there is no bullet in the chamber, will allow you to force a single combatant to back up.

Complexity is added by sheer weight of numbers. When surrounded, *I Am Alive* becomes a game of tactical reading, working out who poses the greatest threat before taking them down in the hope that his followers might back down in kind. But there is a sort of emotional uncanny valley to these encounters, which aim for the nuance of high-tension human face-offs, but in reality fail to deliver on that promise.

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer In-house (Shanghai)
Format 360 (version tested), PS3
Release Out now (360), spring (PS3)

Everyday items are incredibly precious here, and finding every last can of tinned fruit becomes an obsession

Unusually for an action game, the meta-structure of *I Am Alive* involves a score-building mechanic that wouldn't be out of place in a puzzler. At any time you can check your total, represented as a percentage that's calculated from the amount of items you have found, and victims you have helped. As the game progresses, so the number of alternate routes and offshoots available for exploration multiply, and every piece of lead piping that can be clung to acts as a gateway to some new pathway or glowing item. Everyday items have become incredibly precious in this dusty wasteland, and finding every last packet of pills and can of tinned fruit becomes an obsessive pursuit, knowing that their successful retrieval will not only add a valuable resource to your inventory, but also a higher score.

Victims, meanwhile, are broken or wounded citizens who can be aided with everything from a spare medical pack to an intact bottle of wine. Once appeased, these characters offer clues and information as to the possible whereabouts of your family, trading hope in exchange for your benevolence. It's an engaging system that stops *I Am Alive* from becoming too bleak and inhumane. The balance is still tipped towards dog-eat-dog violence (the opportunity to help an aggressor who you wound in self-defence, leaving him clawing at the ground and screaming for aid, is sadly not included), but these moments of humanity hold the ambient narrative back from raging caricature.

The game occasionally drags, arguably due to representing the bleakness of its environment and the challenges of existing within it a little too keenly. Autosave points are few and far between, which means that on anything above normal difficulty your frequent restarts will result in much repetition. Likewise, *I Am Alive*'s platforming is occasionally cumbersome and inexact. But nevertheless this game offers a journey worth charting, one of physics, social decline and welcome terror in a market overrun by zombies.

7



I'M A SURVIVOR
I Am Alive is best played on the toughest difficulty, where a single bullet is an artefact to be treasured and the tiniest mistake while jumping costs the player a trip back through 100m of level. The sense of tension the narrative is reaching for is then met by the play experience, even if the stand-offs with unfriendly characters and resultant combat sequences can be deadly frustrating. 'Camcorder' pickups gift you immediate restarts from a recent checkpoint, but these are few and far between, and more often than not you'll lose ten minutes of progress.

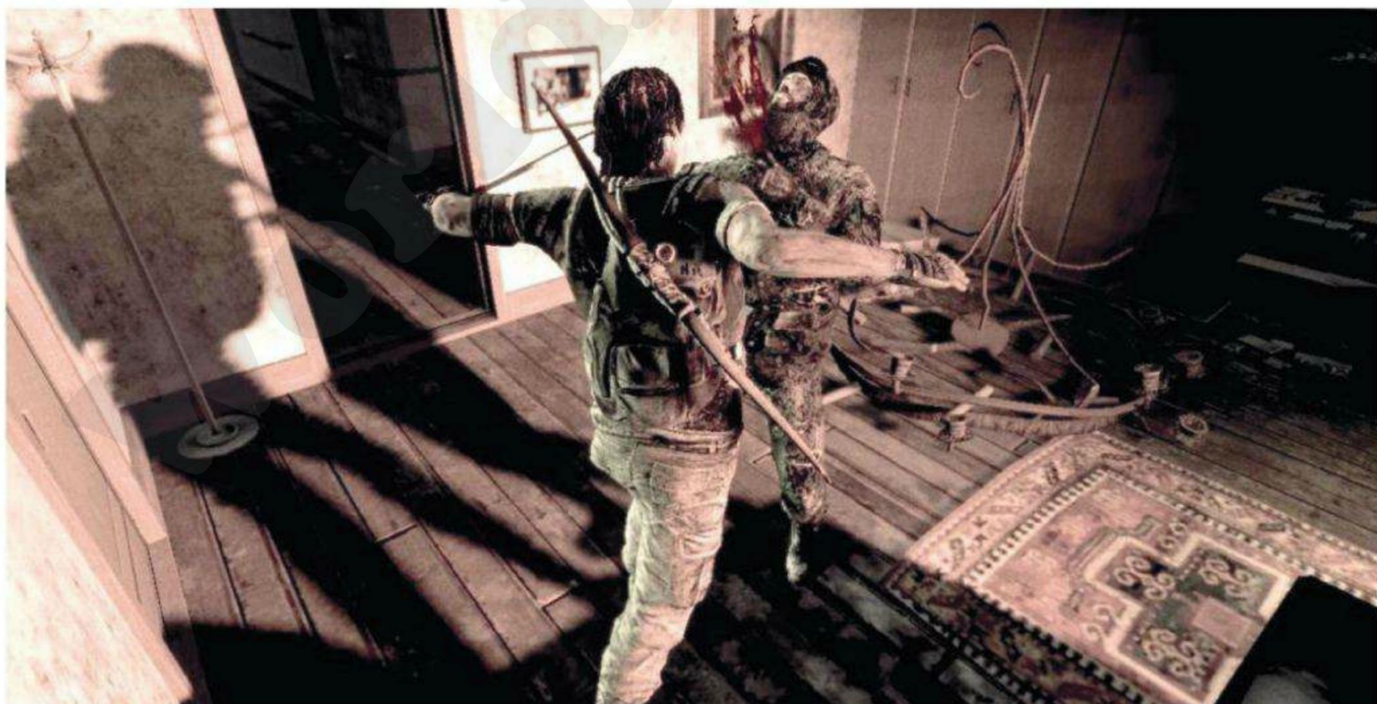
BELOW The washed-out palette makes finding the next foothold or secret walkway all the tougher, and there are times when you may be at a complete loss as to what to do next, with no hint system to offer a lifeline to the groping imagination







ABOVE When climbing, pitons can be used to offer a rest point on the side of buildings to replenish stamina. You can also gain access to a grappling hook later in the game, offering a welcome fresh mode of locomotion



Groups of enemies are often controlled by a stronger leader – take him out and his followers may surrender. Bullets are precious, so judicious use of knife moves also plays a part during combat

Asura's Wrath

When *Resident Evil 4* was discussed in **E**238's article concerning gaming's untouchables, it was decided that the worst thing about Capcom's masterpiece was what others did with its format. A bigger, busier blockbuster than most, its genius was to use carefully meted non-interactivity to go beyond the limits of the game and its parent hardware. The QTE – then considered a relic of the days of *Dragon's Lair* and *Space Ace* – was drafted in to make the unplayable, well, playable. Add plenty of gunplay against backdrops of realtime theatre and you have the blueprint for almost every action game since.

After years of interactive movies – *Modern Warfare*, *Uncharted* and *Gears Of War* – it makes sense that Capcom should finish what it started. And *Asura's Wrath* is the pinnacle of pseudo-interactivity, an action game so spectacular that it's barely a game at all.

Much of this is because its hero, Asura, is an unplayably angry man. Husband to a murdered wife, father to an abducted daughter, he's framed for the murder of a divine emperor and cast into the underworld by treacherous gods. These Guardian Generals, of which he used to be number eight, reinvent themselves as the Seven Deities and begin pillaging souls from a planet of worshipping peasants.

What follows is a series of episodes where waves of weird and wonderful creatures crash against Asura's fist. "Rwarrrgh!" he bellows as they hurtle into the upper atmosphere, presumably to land in a Capcom art book somewhere. This really can't be stressed enough: Asura is *seriously* angry. He's so angry that if he dragon-punched Kratos from *God Of War*, it would leave a Kratos-shaped hole in the moon. At one point in the game, a boss the size of a planet tries to squash him with a fingertip as big as Africa – and regrets it.

It's with this first deity that *Asura's Wrath* outdoes every other action game in terms of incredibility, leaving it nothing to compete with but itself. In one scene, a character flicks a 100ft fire-breathing mammoth onto a mountaintop. In another, Asura has his arms fried off and headbutts an army. In another, he gets drunk and stares at a lady's chest, which happens to be one of most interactive scenes in the game.

You see, the price you have to pay for all this cosmic mayhem is that most of it's just a cutscene – one that offers a completely pointless zoom function as if to suggest it's something more interactive. You can't even sit back with a coffee, because a QTE prompt could ambush you at any time. Respond quickly and the reward is a few more points towards your ranking, which after considerable toil will unlock the game's true (read: not rubbish) ending. Fail to respond and the cutscene marches on anyway.

The closest *Asura's Wrath* gets to gameplay is in its occasional bouts of brawling, which are heavy on the button mashing, and its *Panzer Dragoon*-style shooting sections. In every encounter, you're not attacking the health of particular enemies, but rather the scene as a whole, with your actions adding to a Burst gauge that enables you to trigger a closing cutscene when full.

Publisher Capcom
Developer CyberConnect2
Format 360, PS3 (version tested)
Release Out now

It isn't qualified to teach us anything. For all its luxurious visuals, it knows little about marrying them to gameplay



None of this is particularly difficult: we played the game through on Normal and died precisely three times, then played it on Hard and struggled to tell the difference. The brawling is so spectacularly flamboyant that it's often hard to read, and so the game gives you a 'recovery' button that restores energy after a hit. Much the same goes for the shooting, the 'recovery' there being that it's almost impossible to get killed.

Package all this up in episodes that are bookended with concept art and what you have is a very divisive game, if only because it's incredibly fun to watch. As cutscenes go, these top the ones in *Devil May Cry 4*. And there is at least a sense of method to all those QTE button taps and stick twizzles. Rather than con you into thinking you're controlling something, the prompts here simply accent the beats of the action onscreen. In fact, all of the gameplay is largely aesthetic in function.

Debate over how much artists should hold sway over videogame production was prompted by the troubles of id Software's *Rage*, and that discussion resurfaces here. The concept art most games keep locked away as bonuses is audaciously pushed to the fore in *Asura's Wrath*, punctuating the realtime material with captions and bits of backstory. Again, the option is there to zoom and pan around the images, because otherwise you might wonder why you're holding a controller at all. The rest of the game's artwork then fills up the Extras menu as you play through the story.

The in-game animation is extraordinary as well, to the point where credits appear throughout the game, often on top of the action itself, to remind us just who animated what. (Much of the time it's developer CyberConnect2, which after about 30 mentions makes the entire production feel like a massive ego trip.) And the whole thing's complemented by a terrific score from *.hack* composer LieN. The result is that there's a distinct urge to herald something here, be it a *Dear Esther*-style experiment or a masterclass in producing genuine beauty in Epic's Unreal Engine.

The fact is, however, that *Asura's Wrath* isn't qualified to teach us anything. For all its luxurious visuals, it knows little about how to marry them to gameplay, or how to end the suffering of artists who see their work butchered to meet gameplay's demands. It would sooner not be a videogame at all than find solutions to these problems, and uses the console hardware as little more than a render farm. To say we can learn lessons from it insults the experience of the people who actually try.

5

RIGHT Although the cuts are near seamless, you can tell when *Asura's Wrath* switches between prerendered and realtime footage by the uncannily smooth animation of the former, and the regular framerate drops of the latter.
BELOW Don't let the initial boss battles fool you into expecting the same quality throughout. The first of the Seven Deities is arguably the most exciting. Others require basic button mashing and timely dodges







ABOVE *Panzer Dragoon* and *Space Harrier* have both had their influence on *Asura's* shooting sections, and yet each is vastly superior to them. Dying in these stages is all but impossible, while score attacking them is a chore



The size of the enemies and number of Asura's fists – and he sprouts many – are irrelevant to the brawls. Even on Hard difficulty, enemy attacks such as this will often miss for no apparent reason

Kid Icarus: Uprising

Kid Icarus: Uprising wastes no time in referencing the fact that it's been almost two decades since its star has graced a Nintendo console in any meaningful way, with a cheeky, "Sorry to keep you waiting." Sure, the angelic mascot's cropped up for cameos in a handful of ensemble titles over the years, but if he's had a permanent residence then it's been on the Internet, where's he's inspired hundreds of rumours and dozens of petitions. He's been out of the spotlight for so long that it's easy to wonder what Nintendo's winged hero is supposed to mean to modern audiences.

For the developers, at least, he means a lunge at the hardcore as the star of a lavishly produced action game that's split between lustrous on-rails shooting and scrappily inventive thirdperson ground combat. It blends its influences as easily as its mechanics: the plot may echo *God Of War* with its heavenly double-crosses and mythic supporting cast, but the visuals suggest Nintendo's in Disney mode. No expense has been spared, in fact. Character models are riddled with bright detailing, the landscapes are precision-built from gleaming metal and jutting rock, and the whole thing's covered in honeyed mist and swirling storm clouds. With a rich colour palette and a soaring soundtrack, this would be a beautiful game on any platform. That it manages to work without a stutter on a 3DS is a real testament to the work of *Super Smash Bros* designer Masahiro Sakurai and his team.

And Sakurai's prints are all over *Uprising*, providing a comeback that balances depth and accessibility with little compromise. The control scheme – move with the Circle Pad, aim with the stylus and fire with the left trigger – initially seems lopsided, but works wonderfully for the flying sections, while any slight clumsiness on foot is countered by a responsive dodge. Both modes benefit from an unexpected sense of ambition, too, sending you through clockwork shooting galleries that punish you for wasted bullets, and offering complex dungeons filled with traps.

You can see the team's talent for tactical combat in the range of collectable weapons that factor in distance, speed and even the arc of a shot, while each tool in your arsenal switches from ranged to melee attacks based on context. Loadouts of special powers pitch you towards experimenting with different play styles, and there's a worryingly compulsive weapon-fusing system thrown in, adding a chunk of the *Pokémon* gene to a game that already feels like a smart splicing of *Star Fox* and *Zelda*.

Kid Icarus is back, then, and it turns out we did miss him. With *Uprising*, those Internet petitioners finally have something they can be proud of.

8

Publisher Nintendo
Developer Project Sora
Format 3DS
Release March 23



PIT FIGHTER
Reinforcing *Uprising*'s hardcore credentials is a convincing multiplayer suite, offering two modes that are playable either locally or online. Free-For-All is your standard deathmatch for up to six players, and is a great way to explore the nuances of the game's weapon system. In contrast, Light Vs Dark is a team affair in which groups have a shared health meter. When it's empty, the last player downed becomes Pit, but letting him die means losing the game.

You're going to need a lot of firepower to take down Medusa on harder difficulty settings. Here, Pit's armed with lightning-fast claws, but there's also a staggering line-up of bows, canons, blades and more to pick from



Tekken 3D: Prime Edition

Publisher Namco Bandai
Developer Arika/Namco Bandai
Format 3DS
Release Out now

Unfortunately for Namco, we're past the point of being thrilled at seeing a fighting game running in stereoscopic 3D. *Super Street Fighter IV* was there at 3DS's launch, *Dead Or Alive: Dimensions* followed soon after, and in the interim we've had *BlazBlue*. *Tekken 3D: Prime Edition*'s cause isn't helped by its rough visual edges, a rare and unwelcome sight on 3DS's small screen. That lack of fidelity comes from producer Katsuhiro Harada's demand that the game run at 60fps, even with 3D on. Visuals aside, however, the result is a *Tekken* game that feels uncompromised in its transition to 3DS, and thanks for this must also go to its four-button control scheme, with each face button mapped, as always, to a single limb. The lower screen, meanwhile, is used similarly to *Street Fighter*, divided into four squares that are assigned to a user-defined move. Those uncomfortable flitting between the screen and buttons can also hold down either trigger, which maps the lower screen's shortcuts to the face buttons.

Tekken as a series has evolved into a complex brawler dependent on extended juggle combos. It's a unique system, one that isn't based on timing, memory or precise execution, but in spotting an opening and maximising damage. So it's pleasing to find the team has done much of the hard work for you by mapping the default shortcuts to moves that form combos. It serves as a gentle introduction to each character's bread-and-butter combo strings, but discourages experimentation and means that multiplayer fights between less-skilled players quickly descend into repetition.

Sadly, that multiplayer also suffers from Harada's 60fps mantra. There's no 3D when playing human opponents online or off, and it's a slender package, with a standard vs mode offline, and ranked or player matches online. It's light on singleplayer content, too, offering only Quick Battle – an endless series of matches against the AI – and Special Survival, which tasks you with beating increasing numbers of foes with a single health bar. The bare-bones Training mode does little to help the inexperienced either.

With so sparse a feature set, it's left to the combat system to compensate for the lack of breadth with depth. And given there's all 40 of *Tekken 6*'s cast to pick from, there's plenty of meat on these skinny bones for those happy to move around the cast. But 3DS is well stocked with fighters already, and there's little to ensure that *Tekken 3D* stands out from its peers.

6



WALLFLOWERS BEWARE
If a move looks like it should connect, it will, whether you're in the air or lying prone. Not only does being trapped against a wall prevent your opponent's attacks from pushing you out of range of follow-ups, but the solid surface at your back also stops you from falling to the ground, giving your foe free rein to keep attacking. Suddenly, everything combos.

Combo strings alternate between low, mid and high attacks, an initially confusing system that requires you to watch for the opening frames of each move. At least it's good preparation for *Street Fighter X Tekken*



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Super Stardust Delta

Publisher SOE
Developer Housemarque
Format Vita
Release Out now (UK, US)

On the surface of it, *Super Stardust Delta* is all about the controls. Housemarque's glitzy twin-stick shooter makes the most of Vita's thumbsticks, its campaign mode manages to rope the motion sensors in for camera movement and an EMP bomb, and then goes on to use both touchscreens for special weapon deployment. What's more, a series of well-meaning – if largely unexciting – minigames showcase everything from tilt-based steering to a kind of bi-touchscreen pinch that has you break open asteroids by squeezing the handheld from the front and back.

The real magic, though, lurks with a few lifts from Housemarque's recent platformer *Outland*. Your rotating arsenal – with each gun type effective against a very specific type of foe and weak against all others – has been reduced to just two options here. But with fire and ice clearly delineated by red or blue plasma, the developers are now free to pile on the bipolar intricacy, threading you through waves of alternate enemy types until you're switching attacks every few seconds and settling into the game's newer, tidier rhythms. At times, this take on *Super Stardust* feels more like a puzzler than an all-out shooter, and the gains in depth haven't been noticeably offset by a drop in pace.

All of which makes the latest instalment in Housemarque's rather impersonally pretty series the best yet. With *Delta*, *Super Stardust* has found a pulse. Perhaps all that's missing now is the soul to go with it.

8



Lumines: Electronic Symphony

Publisher Q Entertainment
Developer Ubisoft
Format Vita
Release Out now (UK, US), April 19 (Japan)

As the silky house of Deep Dish's The Future Of The Future kicks in on the opening stage (or skin) of *Electronic Symphony*, you quickly realise licensed music is *Lumines'* secret sauce, the relative paucity of which has always held the series back from its true potential. It's always been better when played as a music game, rather than a puzzler, and that's clearer than ever thanks to an excellent soundtrack that's been cherry-picked from 30 years of electronic music.

With familiar music, the sound effects made as you move, rotate and drop blocks into place are much easier to pick out. Those effects complement the music; in fact, they improve it. Rotate a block during LCD Soundsystem's Disco Infiltrator, for instance, and you'll hear a cowbell. It looks delightful, too, as ringing an endorsement of its host platform's screen as the original was to PSP's back in 2005.

The mechanics remain largely unchanged, but the special block that wipes out chains of the same colour is now active the moment it falls into place. A new block, which flips the colour of those it touches, serves only to confuse and is best dropped into an empty corner to minimise disruption. And, as ever, once you reach a certain skill level, games simply last too long. But with Tetsuya Mizuguchi's often bland musical experimentation replaced with some of electronica's finest moments, *Electronic Symphony* breathes new life into a series that had previously appeared stagnant.

8



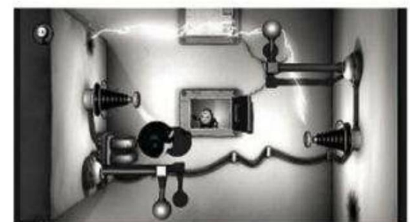
Escape Plan

Publisher SCE
Developer Fun Bits
Format Vita
Release Out now

A game of getting from A to B in as few inputs as possible, *Escape Plan* puts Vita's touch controls through their paces. The escapees in question are Lil and Laarg, held captive by blabbering antagonist Bakaku in his Burton-esque prison. Each room presents a different challenge – some simple, some sinister – but all are brought to life with noir brushstrokes. Standout looks are to be expected from the producers of colourful PSN tower defence charmer *Fat Princess*, but *Escape Plan* achieves something that game didn't: it delivers a unique gameplay spin on an old concept, thanks to the designer's embrace of Vita's controls. Swiping, squeezing, popping, pushing and tilting the characters and their world is a game of discovery, and chasing the star ratings awarded for using but a few gestures adds replay to *Escape Plan*'s one-trick rooms. This approach allows Fun Bits to appease both casual and hardcore players. If you just want to see the game's sights, tap and touch till you find the solution; if you want to hit higher scores, be economical with your moves and logical in your assessment of the stages.

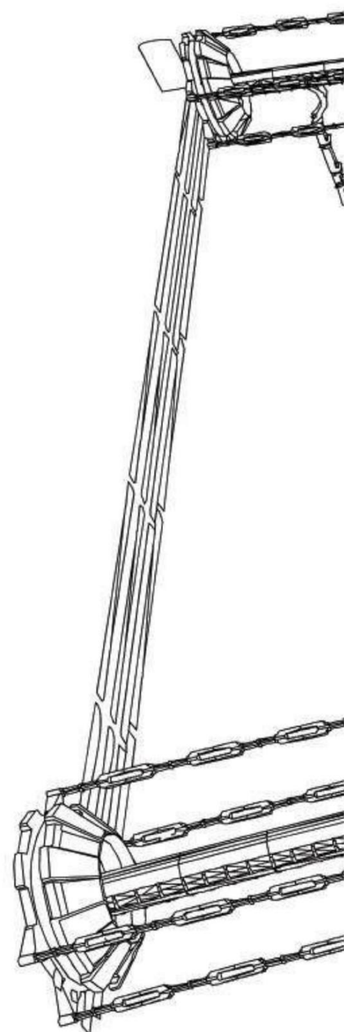
There are shades of *Sleepwalker*, *Lemmings* and even the contemporary *Lost Winds* in *Escape Plan*'s oddball world of quiet quirk. It's not perfect, and even skilled players will struggle with some of the more demanding multitasking required for certain scenarios (the level-skip is an acknowledgement of the inconsistent difficulty), but it's clever, cunning and entertaining.

7



create

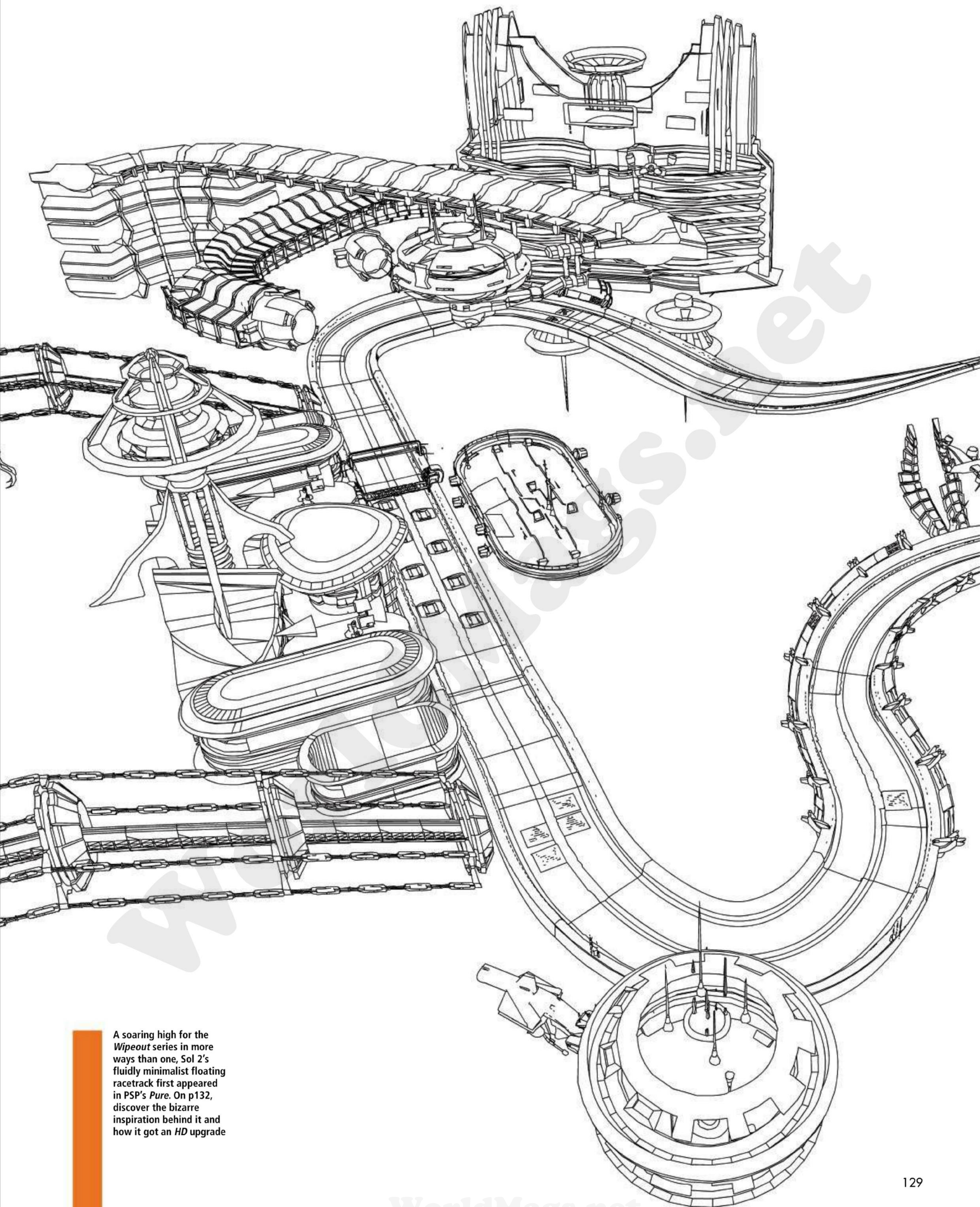
Lifting the lid on the art, science, and business of making games



This issue's People, Places, Things kicks off on p130 where we catch up with Warner Bros Seattle's Laura Fryer and discover her management-as-service philosophy. Then we head to SCE Studio Liverpool on p132 to learn more about the heady height of track building that is the cloud-wreathed Sol 2 of *Wipeout*, and why it owes a debt to Nintendo. Once the vertigo has eased, we travel to *Beyond Good & Evil*'s sedate Hillys to peer through the lens of Jade's camera on p134, and find that shooting photos can be more engaging than shooting bad guys. The Art Of… *Mirror's Edge* on p136 sees us catch up with Rob Briscoe, the environmental artist behind the game's remarkable vistas, while in Studio Profile on p140, we talk to mid-size publisher Paradox Interactive and learn how it's able to thrive in a segment of the market that certain logic would expect to be dwindling. Going out with a bang in The Making Of… on p144, we join Harmonix to learn about its amazing comeback gig, *Rock Band*. Concluding this issue's Create are our regular columnists, with designer Tadhg Kelly (p148) laying down the foundational creative constants that apply throughout videogames, and LucasArts' Clint Hocking (p150) dissecting the skills that players exercise while playing. Finally, Tiger Style's Randy Smith (p152) expands on why branching dialogue may be more satisfying, while scribe James Leach (p154) considers how overly lengthy word counts can hinder effective writing.



www.bit.ly/jT6wkn
The business section of **Edge**'s Web site



A soaring high for the *Wipeout* series in more ways than one, Sol 2's fluidly minimalist floating racetrack first appeared in PSP's *Pure*. On p132, discover the bizarre inspiration behind it and how it got an *HD* upgrade

People

LAURA FRYER

The Warner exec who believes management is really a support role



Fryer's experience of launching the original Xbox console put her in an excellent position to liaise with development teams making games for Microsoft's hardware

Ask **Laura Fryer** and she'll tell you that there's an "irreducible mystery" at the heart of the creative process. That sounds like something of a problem, especially since her job, as vice president and general manager of Warner Bros Games' Seattle studios, is to manage that mystery. "It's definitely possible to manage something that you don't understand, though," she argues. "You can grow a garden without being able to predict the weather. You start by making sure that everything you actually do control is right: till the soil, plant good seeds, keep the rabbits out. Then, for all the things that you can't control, you pay attention and adapt. I once had a great mentor who taught me to think of production and management as acts of service. I still think of my job as serving my team. In the most important sense, my philosophy hasn't changed."

Perhaps not, but her job has. Fryer's now one of the most high-profile women in the game industry, a position she reached by working her way up from product support at Microsoft – back before the company even had a proper game division – to launching the original Xbox as Seamus Blackley's second-in-command in the Advanced Technology Group. Throughout her many different roles, however, Fryer's love of games has remained constant. It's a love she's been kindling ever since she joined her high school's Dungeons & Dragons club.

Even in seventh grade, the line between being a player and being a creator was starting to blur for her. "D&D was special," she explains. "It's really a game construction kit: the players create the world together. From that start, we also made our own games, cutting out cards and boards, and drawing them by hand. They were usually dungeon crawlers, where you'd roll to move and then have to fight some monster for a reward card of gold or jewels."

At school, Fryer also learned BASIC programming and discovered Bullfrog's *Populous*, the game that started her towards a career in the industry. A job at Microsoft followed, where she quickly switched from support to testing. It was a natural step, she argues, since "support is about methodically fixing software, and testing is about methodically breaking it". Fryer's first producer credit came with a stint on the fledgling Internet Gaming Zone. By the time she left the company to join Warner Bros in 2009, she had shipped a console and helped to launch the oft-imitated *Gears Of War* series. Typically, when asked about these experiences, she largely describes her work in support terms, talking about linking different groups of people together, and making sure that they understood each other.

Given her background in nuts-and-bolts production, it's hardly surprising that Fryer defines her current role – managing a range of Warner Bros projects – in a pragmatic manner. "I do a lot of listening," she says. "It's about understanding where the games are, and where they need to be, trying to remove as many roadblocks and give the team as much support as I possibly can. I tell producers and leads to come in each day and ask themselves: 'How can we make this a better game? Are the controls working? Can we improve the framerate? Do playtesters like the third level?' Whatever the problem is, find it and fix it."

It's an approach to development that puts the games – rather than the personalities that make them – firmly at the centre of production. "It's important to work backwards from the needs of the game," Fryer argues. "The team should form itself around that, and everyone else should form themselves around the needs of the team. It should be an organic process. Production and management are like salt: a little helps a lot, but a lot ruins the dish. I don't want to keep things in place, I want everyone to continuously adapt to the needs of the game."

"Production and management are like salt: a little helps a lot, but a lot ruins the dish"

It could be a recipe for communal chaos, but Fryer's aware of the need for balancing creative freedom with leadership. "I think the best way to maintain a clear vision is to invest an individual with responsibility for maintaining that vision," she suggests. "But although individuals are best for focus, they aren't best at coverage. Groups are better at exploring. So, the ideal is an individual maintaining the vision, and a great team backing them up, clarifying and challenging the vision.

"I push for as much ad hoc, lateral feedback as possible. I want people to play each other's games. Peer feedback from within the same discipline is especially valuable. That can be tricky, because it stings more when it's critical, and it's more rewarding when it's positive, so it's more emotionally charged in general. In our studio, the lead designer listens to the team, the studio, playtesters… everyone. Some of the coolest ideas in our games didn't originate with the lead designer. But it's the lead designer who maintains the vision, and decides how we act on feedback. That's how we balance design-by-megalomania and design-by-committee."

It all comes back to making the game better, even if that means stepping outside of traditional disciplines. "I'm a big fan of 'blurring the roles', in the sense that I want everyone to care about everything. I want the producers to give input on the design, and I want the designers to care about production. I want everyone to pay attention and speak up when they see something that could be better, even if it's not their official role."

Fryer's most recent project is Monolith's *Gotham City Impostors*. An FPS in which you're neither Batman nor the Joker, but you do like to help them out, it's built around a weird IP-stretching premise. It's one that Fryer argues could only have emerged from an environment that encourages collaboration and discussion. A budget-priced online-only shooter is a risk at the best of times, however, and it's not yet clear whether *Gotham City Impostors*' eye-catching conceit will help it find an audience in the long term.

As for the future, Fryer's facing a potentially difficult period for studios with her usual blend of informed optimism and pragmatism: "It's an exciting time, because there's lots of change, and change creates opportunity. I'm excited about new platforms, input devices, markets, and business models, because they all mean new games. I'm not frightened. Not because I think everything will be great, but because I know that we'll deal with whatever comes along.

"Production is about problem solving, and there are new problems every day," she laughs. "So there's lots of opportunity for at least some kinds of creativity." ■

CV

URL www.warnerbros.com
Selected softography *Vanguard: Saga Of Heroes, Crimson Skies, Gears Of War, Gears Of War 2, Zoo Tycoon 2: Marine Mania, Yager, Gotham City Impostors*



Places

SOL 2

Wipeout's race through the clouds is high-octane Heaven and Hell



The rich blue skies of Sol 2 – streaked with wisps of cloud – give a deceptively soft framing to one of *Wipeout*'s hardest tracks, a vertiginous loop designed to make you fear its edges

From *Wipeout Pure*, *Wipeout HD*
Developer Sony Liverpool
Origin UK
Release 2005 (PSP), 2008 (PS3)

As if trying to pilot a futuristic hovercraft wasn't enough for your eyes and brain to digest, one of *Wipeout*'s most memorable tracks also insists on snapping the tether of gravity. The cloud-surrounded speedway of Sol 2 stands out as the crowning achievement in Studio Liverpool's long history of track construction, offering a suitably high-flying metaphor for the lofty ambitions that fuelled its design. That Sol 2 debuted in PSP's *Wipeout Pure* before making the leap to *Wipeout HD* only renders the team's feat more impressive. But how did the concept get off the ground?

"Colin Berry [then lead designer] came in and had an idea in his head about scissors," explains **Karl Jones**, a junior designer on *Pure*, who later assumed the role of lead designer for *Wipeout HD* and *Fury*. The inspiration may sound abstract, but you can see it reflected in both Sol 2's steely aesthetic and razor-sharp lines, particularly in its *HD* incarnation. The speedway itself even has the appearance of being snipped from cloth by a track-design tailor, imbued with contoured twists and turns, and framed by a collection of obscure metallic structures.

"We needed to design architecture to reflect how high you were," says **Marcus Tanner**, an artist on *Pure* and senior artist on *HD*. "It's future-retro, art deco, bold geometric shapes, [and] then there are materials that look like the jet designs of the 1950s: very clean, shiny and offsetting the big, bold shapes. We wanted to get a sense of freedom [and] the upper atmosphere. There are weird cradle shapes that hold the track up, a reference to the antigravity theme. The palette we chose was very cold and crisp to emphasise where you are in the environment: so high up."

The track even has the appearance of being snipped from cloth, imbued with contoured twists and turns

The high-altitude setting of Sol 2 isn't just for your sensory delight – it's also employed to scare you rigid. In a break from *Wipeout* tradition, much of Sol 2 is barrier-free. "It was a late track [in the game]. We wanted the fear aspect of falling, so it was much more effective if you were falling off the track," Jones explains. There's also another rationale the designer candidly gives for the removal of barriers from certain chunks of the stage: "To make it more like Rainbow Road in *Mario Kart*".

The leap to PS3 with *Wipeout HD* didn't alter Sol 2 as much as you might expect. Jones: "There was a lot more detail we could put in, but we kept to the basic positioning of the shapes around the track, because it worked so well in *Pure*. We just enhanced the visuals; we didn't want to go over the top. One thing we did do was up-render the track-surface collision geometry – the undulations you got from the less-polyed version of *Pure* didn't really lend itself to the PS3 version. Not for a visual thing, but for a smoother ride. The ship reacts to each polygon, so when you don't have many polygons you feel the transition from polygon to polygon more."



Most of the neon distractions of a typical *Wipeout* stage are stripped away in Sol 2 – it's more THX 1138 than Blade Runner

Sol 2 may be a standout track in the *Wipeout* canon, but it was devised by adhering to the team's established design procedure, internally referred to as 'dynamic composition'. "The term relates to blocking out a track," Tanner explains. "Quite often, we'll get a track to race around and you need to break it up with moments to make it more interesting. In basic terms, you have an open area, closed area, open area and so on. And you populate each of these with objects that give the player rhythm. You might have an urban area where you need objects close to the track to enhance a sense of speed, or an open area where you need to give the player a focus object to look at. It's a dynamic composition, because you're always travelling forwards. It's almost like an animation – as you're racing around the track, it's unfolding. It's about getting a good flow and rhythm to the objects you place around the track."

Being set in the skies, however, the *Pure* incarnation of Sol 2 is arguably a little difficult to get your head – and your ship – around. Since the look of Sol 2 is so consistent in its colour palette, the team took the opportunity to add what it calls 'raceification' elements to the *HD* iteration. "Because Sol 2 is so sparse, you don't get many objects to telegraph where the track's going for the player," Tanner says. "So we did use our artistic liberty to add things that would look good, but also help the player around the track. We added raceification [elements] with road signs to guide the player around the track. If you compare the two [versions of Sol 2], there are also adverts added in the *HD* version." Such simple in-game details appear perfunctory – a means to add sense of place and style – but they are also crucial to letting players know where they are, acting as waypoints or milestones. "There are things like signature buildings. In Sol 2, it's turbines, so that from muscle memory you know what to do at that point."

The end result is a track that builds on the design of Sol 2's PSP origins, polished and pearlescent in form. It transforms the stage from disorienting in its visual repetition to dazzling in its beauty, and all while enhancing its flow. With sufficient practice, enough laps of its smooth corners and curves, players can master Sol 2's initially harrowing difficulty. The pristine, angelic style of the track belies a structural devil – one of the best demonstrations to date of Studio Liverpool's ability to marry the challenging and functional to the drop-dead gorgeous. ■

Things

JADE'S CAMERA

Sometimes a single zoom lens is worth a thousand sniper scopes



Beyond Good & Evil's **camera is a well-thought-out piece of prop design. Rounded and chunky, it conveys a wonderful sense of weight and utility. Few games bring such warmth to technology**

edge.co32671w
Unedited interview and NG videos

From *Beyond Good & Evil*
Developer Ubisoft (Montpelier studio)
Origin France
Release 2003

While the mere mention of *Beyond Good & Evil* is enough to make some fans teary-eyed, it won't be memories of the game's searing mechanical innovation getting them emotional. After all, Michel Ancel's beloved action-adventure can seem conservative once you pick it apart. Its structure is borrowed from *Zelda*, for instance, while its stealth sections reuse plenty of ideas from *Metal Gear Solid* before Ubisoft's Montpelier studio then adds some wonky implementation of its own. Melee combat is standard thirdperson fare enhanced with the odd backflip, while its central premise is echoed in dozens of shooters.

So what marks this game out? Well, it's the quirky cast of characters, including an inventor pig and a rulebook-quoting secret agent. It's the watery, European loveliness of Hillys, its overcast skies and gently rounded architecture painted in warm tones. It's Jade, *BG&E*'s protagonist, living in a lighthouse full of stained glass windows and orphan children. And, perhaps most importantly, it's the fact that she views this strange world and all of its careworn inhabitants through the lens of a camera, rather than the scope of an assault rifle.

It's rare that such a simple design quirk can do so much to change the feel of a game, but it's also hard to believe that we'd all still be talking about how different it feels if *BG&E* had been based on gunplay. Luckily, when the alien DomZ and their proxies in the Alpha Section threaten Jade's mining planet, she picks up her camera – not a pistol and a pocketful of ammo – and joins the resistance, ready to expose the regime rather than merely thin its ranks. What follows is a familiar muddle of combat, puzzling, and bosses, but it doesn't necessarily feel familiar any more. In fact, it often seems cerebral, sophisticated and faintly left-wing. Your actions and objectives are always justified, and the limited extent of your abilities is almost realistic at times. With that camera and little but melee skills to protect you if things go wrong, for once you can really believe you're one of the good guys.

So while you're still sneaking into factories and mysterious warehouses, you're there looking for evidence of corruption, rather than rooting out metal MacGuffins to slap explosive charges on. Meanwhile, your warm-blooded targets aren't walking around ready to be sniped from a safe distance, but lurking in the darkness waiting to be snapped. Although that essentially comes down to the same mechanic, it leaves you feeling furtive, heroic and exhilarated. It's a far cry from the dehumanising distanced headshots of *Modern Warfare*'s Pripyat. And when you make your way back to the streets of Hillys, you can see the fruits of your work as your photographic scoops start to turn the sleepy tide of public opinion.



It's hard not to wonder what *BG&E* would be like if Ancel's earlier, somewhat dreamier take on the project had been realised

The camera's much more than a rifle stand-in. It makes a connection to the gameworld that goes far beyond simply allowing you to kill the things in it. When it isn't helping you complete missions or performing fancy sci-fi busywork, such as picking out constellations, it's a device that encourages you to closely examine the environment Ubisoft's created, as well as the characters with which the studio has populated its setting.

> Although snapping comes down to the same mechanic as shooting, it leaves you feeling furtive and exhilarated

Early on in the adventure, Jade's contacted by a Hillyan science centre looking for somebody to photograph all of the planet's dwindling animal life. It's a clever means of paying for upgraded kit, such as digital zooms, and it also threads a handful of side objectives into most of the game's levels. This means you'll inch through dungeons with one eye on the patrolling guards, and another on promising cracks in the walls.

On top of that, your secondary mission is also tartly thematic: *BG&E* gives you tools to help you preserve its environment – even if it's only as a photographic record – rather than those to slowly destroy it. Hunting for Hillys' critters even encourages good habits that any real-world photographer would recognise, ensuring that you get used to having your camera ready, practise lining up shots, try out compositions and learn to snap what looks good to you.

In this respect, a surprising amount of the game might be quietly built around Jade's greatest weapon. Hillys' creamy skybox looks great in contrast to the slippery black rocks of the planet's mountains, for example, while indoor vents puff artful little jets of steam, and even anti-personnel mines have a certain aesthetic charm. Get a companion in the frame and they'll stiffen with nerves or pose, while everywhere you look there are teapots, clumps of ferns, and even battered old crates itching to be photographed just for the pleasure of getting a nice shot. Through the eyepiece of Jade's camera, you'll come to view *BG&E*'s various creations with an intensity of focus many other games simply can't engender.

Does photography define Ubisoft's cult classic, then? Mechanically, it's hard to argue that it does, given your ability to store personal snapshots is limited, and in most missions your camera could be taken out and replaced with a gun, a tricorder, or even Link's catapult. A few quick tweaks could drop you back into a world of headshots and hacking with little noticeable change in pace.

In other ways, though, Jade's shutterbug tendencies are totally transformative, encouraging you to capture the world as it is, instead of shredding it for cover or tactical advantage. Go to Hillys and you'll get to know the place. And for once you'll have the pictures to prove it. ■

THE ART OF…
Mirror's Edge

Artist Rob Briscoe on designing the world of DICE's freerunner



www.bit.ly/zwUunn
Extended gallery, plus more from Briscoe



This article's images appear courtesy of game art site Dead End Thrills (www.deadendthrills.com)

Key to the timeless look of *Mirror's Edge* is DICE's decision to use global illumination renderer Beast, shunning the antiquated, entirely manual lighting system of Unreal Engine 3 at the time. This made the game possible on consoles

Q&A

Rob Briscoe
Environment artist



A product of John Riccitiello's drive to bring bold new IP into EA's portfolio, *Mirror's Edge* was ultimately hamstrung by a mix of publisher expectations, over-ambition, and a need to customise Unreal Engine 3. Nevertheless, its gun-shy gameplay and sensational environments won the hearts of many critics and ensured it cult success. In his time at DICE, **Rob Briscoe** (who recently refitted *Dear Esther* to stunning effect) designed two of the game's most iconic locales: The Shard and a storm drain based on Tokyo's mind-boggling G-Cans project. He also was a major contributor to its Pure DLC. We talk with him to find out how he did it.

How did The Shard come about?
It's an amalgamation of architectural designs and stuff that was studied at the time. We had an idea early on of what we wanted to do, which was this triangular, almost impossible-looking building just to really dominate the skyline. It was collaboration between the level designers, the artists and the concept artists. It's hard to think back now what the real influence was, but I think it was just a case of building the impossible, which is this kind of theme throughout it all.

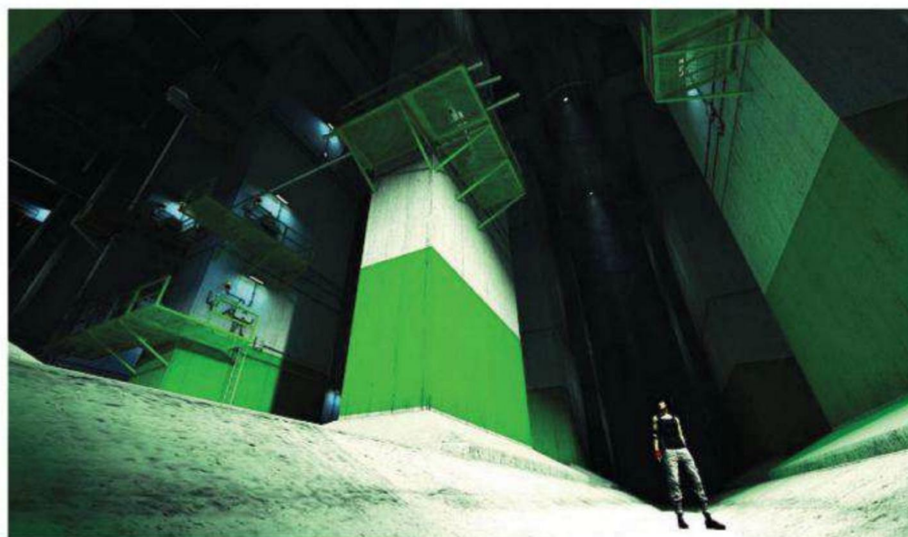
How about *Half-Life 2*'s Citadel?
It was definitely an influence, for me at least, in the fact that it's just one of the things that *Half-Life 2* did great, giving you this goal from the get-go. You get out onto the square and straight away you've got this huge, ominous, looming *thing* in the background that you know... that's where shit's going down later on. It gives you an overall goal straight away.

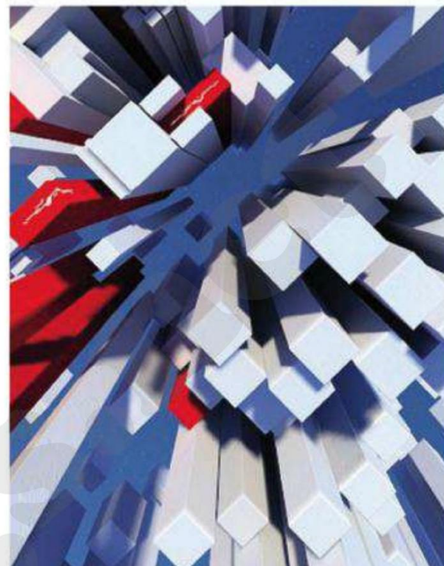
Some of the early concepts for The Shard project in London look very similar, in terms of its reflectivity and place in the skyline.
It was supposed to just look like a complete mirror, so whenever you see it, even at night... I'm just looking at these [real-life] Shard pictures now, and you see all these lights coming through the actual glass, which ruins the whole effect. Ours was more supposed to just blend into the background. Not completely blend in, maybe, but look like an aberration effect – this weird optical illusion of a mirror in the sky.

How did you come across Japan's G-Cans as an inspiration?
Well, the level designer and I were just brainstorming ideas and looking at unusual architecture from Korea and Shanghai and stuff. And one of my mates just sent me one of these images of this huge [chamber]...

The Cathedral.
Yeah. I was like, "What the fuck *is* it? What is it?" He said it was a sewer. And I said, "What

Clockwise from right: the city and glass facade of The Shard skyscraper, which was designed to blend into the skyline; The Shard's interior; the storm drains, which are modelled on Toyko's G-Cans project





the hell have they been eating over there?" We found it [online] and it was just like, "That has *got* to go in." It just really speaks to the kind of weird, semi-futuristic architecture that was in the game at the time. And the other opportunity it presented was that it offered an opportunity to do some really good vertical gameplay within an indoor environment, so we could get a really good feeling of vertigo, but not have it be an office building or something boring like that.

Your two levels are pretty much the only ones in the game that don't take place out in the sunshine. Is that a coincidence?
I think it was luck of the draw, really. You got assigned a level and you didn't have much choice in it. You were assigned to a level designer who'd already been told what they were going to do, and they had a bunch of pictures and ideas they were given of what it should be. We basically just took it from there.

How about the Pure DLC, on which you did a lot of work? How did that come about?
At the end of that project, I think *Battlefield: Bad Company 2* was getting towards its crunch time and the whole team went to either that or *Battlefield 3*. But EA wanted [*Mirror's Edge*] DLC from the get-go, because DLC was really kicking off and making loads of money. I think we had two or three level designers, if that, and one artist: me, at least at the beginning. We had this idea of just themes for each level. One was pure cubes, another was obtuse angles and conflicting geometry, and another one was just like streamlined geometry – curves and things like that. I worked together with our technical artist and we basically invented this material that could just be used on brushwork in the game. I think it was probably one of the coolest things I've worked on. Just a fun, creative break, really. ■



STUDIO PROFILE

Paradox Interactive

Keeping it niche: how this developer-turned-publisher is making the most of the squeezed middle



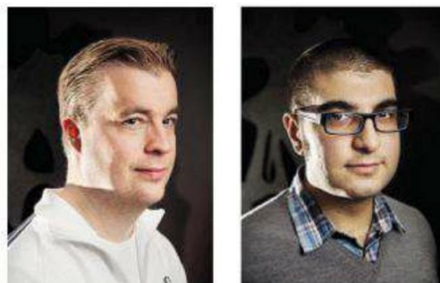
1 *A Game Of Dwarves* looks to take the qualities of *Dwarf Fortress* and give them an accessible visualisation.
2 *War Of The Roses* promises to be a 'medieval *Battlefield*'. It's even nabbed one of that series' producers, Gordon Van Dyke, to oversee production.
3 A blend of big-team FPS and RTS, historical fact and sci-fi, *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare* will allow the player to flit from ground level to a commander role at will.
4 Fishing and foraging will be time-consuming in *Salem*. But hard graft is what it takes to craft a totally freeform, player-driven society.
5 The next expansion for *Magicka* will be *The Other Side Of The Coin*, which allows players to be vampires.
6 *Napoleon's Campaigns II* will carefully recreate France's famous period of expansion

Paradox Interactive's success may be as puzzling to some industry observers as its namesake conundrums. Only last year, Epic Games' Cliff Bleszinski pointed to the rapid coalescence of the game industry into two clumps at either end of a studio-size scale. On one end, you have the burgeoning indie scene; on the other, mega-developers. Medium-sized devs and publishers look to be in trouble, so the thinking goes, being unable to compete with the low overheads and quick turnaround of indie development, and lacking the sort of investment that gurgles around marquee titles at, say, EA. And yet Paradox, a middleweight developer and publisher of niche titles, has just had its best year ever, citing a 250 per cent rise in profit.

This figure, along with an avalanche of other investor-pleasing stats, is being announced tonight at Paradox's annual conference, to which we've been invited in order to catch up with the company. Staged at Sweden's 'most haunted' mansion, the affair recalls the extravagance, intimacy and sense of genuine celebration that have long since drained from the yearly events of most larger game industry companies. Paradox has also splashed out on full medieval costumes for all of its attending staff, and entertainment in the form of a battle re-enactment society and a disconcertingly inexpert fire dancer. Holding court is **Fredrik Wester**, Paradox's outspoken, pithy, indefatigable CEO, and self-styled Lord Protector of the Realm, who's appropriately gowned and crowned.

He's the first to admit that Paradox's rocketing figures are in large part due to the success of *Magicka*, a tongue-in-cheek fantasy top-down splatter 'em up conceived by Arrowhead Studios, then a team of just eight university students. The pupil-dilating figures for the game are as follows: 1.3 million copies sold, plus a further half a million for the first expansion, and 4 million individual DLC purchases. All of which rather contradicts the idea that there is no market for games of this size. The mistake, Paradox says, is in trying to make exactly the same sort of games as the triple-A publishers. At Paradox's chosen scale, the key is getting the right hook, and putting your energy into making that as sharp as possible.

Certainly, credit should go to Arrowhead and its charmingly silly and mechanically adventurous game, but the fact that Paradox found it and helped bring it to market so successfully is no



CEO Fredrik Wester (left) and producer Shams Jorjani. Now that Paradox has cultivated niche PC publishing, where next? Wester suggests it will be looking into mobile development

accident – this is exactly the sort of eventuality that the company's strategy is intended to encourage. Officially founded in 1999, Paradox initially specialised in developing detailed strategy games. But in dominating this niche, it found a stable market largely unaffected by the pressures felt by other publishers. It has since come to the realisation that it isn't strategy titles that are its forte, but special-interest games that would otherwise be trampled in the mass market.

"Being niche gives us so much more moving room," says **Shams Jorjani**, a producer and business development strategist (or, in Wester's words, 'corporate paladin'). "If LucasArts want to make a Star Wars game, they have to make it for all platforms. They could never release just a PC game, because they have to go for the big bucks. And that means if they're making it for consoles, they've got to fit the game to those controls. They wouldn't be able to make a true sequel to *TIE Fighter* or *X-Wing*, for instance, because that doesn't fit the console mould. That's why you get games like *Force Unleashed*, which… have problems. Clearly, there's a good game there, but it's been muddled by the need to go as big as possible. Going big is not synonymous with good quality."

> "That's why you get games like Force Unleashed… Going big is not synonymous with good quality"

While console ports of Paradox's strategy games seem unlikely, then, this PC bias across its portfolio has allowed it to adapt extremely quickly to the onset of digital distribution, establishing the GamersGate download service.

"I think the problem is that a lot of people had a hard time with the transition to digital," says Wester when we bring up Bleszinski's theory of a squeezed middle. "I still hear people saying, 'Yeah, we're going to do this boxed console game,' and I can't really see mid-size publishers doing that. I can see the big guys doing console titles. That's not a problem, because, when you do the profit-and-loss chart, if you sell five million units of *GTA* [then] you're going to make a shitload of money. But if you say you're going to sell 20,000 on the Xbox, you're going to lose a lot of money."

With PCs and their easy means of digital distribution, however, Paradox's games have thrived, ditching the overheads that normally thwart designs of peculiar appeal, modest budgets, and relatively unknown developers. In fact, because of its care not to overreach, it has gone almost unchallenged in this space, actively targeting games in these categories.

"We know niche," says Wester. "We've been doing this since 1998. I've been with the company since 2003, and I've been one of the owners since 2004. We know how to market niche games, and we know how to publish them. Everything is lined up. It's like a factory." He looks momentarily uncertain. "Wait, that's bad. It's like a really *fun* factory."

"There was a misconception a few years back that the PC was dead," says Jorjani, back on topic. "The misconception now is the middle-class developer or publisher is dead. You had 2K saying for a long time that you can't make turn-based strategy. I agree – if you want to sell five million, it's going to be pretty challenging to make a turn-based strategy game. But we don't need to sell five million. When you don't have that top-down approach, you have completely different ways to do business. That's what Fred has pioneered all these years, and what sets Paradox apart – we almost never start by looking at how



Founded 1999
Employees 45
Key staff Fredrik Wester (CEO), Johan Andersson (executive VP of development), Shams Jorjani (producer)
URL www.paradoxplaza.com
Selected softography *Europa Universalis, Crusader Kings, Hearts Of Iron, King Arthur, Magicka, Penumbra: Black Plague*
Current projects *A Game Of Dwarves, Gettysburg: Armored Warfare, Salem, War Of The Roses, Warlock: Master Of The Arcane*





Crusader Kings II **(left) has helped establish Paradox as a purveyor of deep strategy games, sharing an engine with *Europa Universalis III*. But it's the mascot from the company's biggest brush with the mainstream, *Magicka*, that has pride of place at its Stockholm HQ reception**

much money we could make. With *Magicka*, for instance, we asked: 'What's the worst-case scenario? What if we only sell 10,000 copies? Would we survive that? Can we take that chance?' And we were like, 'Yeah.' So if we can take it, we do it."

Magicka isn't a grand strategy title, but a game about comedy wizards involved in slapstick carnage. It's an unusual stablemate for Paradox's fastidiously accurate empire-management titles, marking the company's willingness to embrace oddball games from every genre. While it continues to serve up sober strategy games in abundance – *Victoria II*, *Napoleon's Campaigns II*, *Crusader Kings II*, *Magna Mundi* – Paradox's slate for 2012 demonstrates increasingly catholic tastes. *Warlock: Master Of The Arcane* is perhaps the least dramatic departure, delivering a stripped-back fantasy refit of *Civilization* with a little *Heroes Of Might And Magic* on the side. Then there's *Salem*, a crafting MMOG about collaborative labour and emergent social structures set in America's colonial past. And while the name *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare* might sound like a neat fit for Paradox, it belongs to a slightly barmy shooter-RTS hybrid that jazzes up American Civil War battles with sci-fi weaponry.

"If you come to me and say you have a game that's better than WOW, I will tell you [that] you don't"

Judging by the Paradox-fuelled buzz, however, its greatest hopes are pinned on *A Game Of Dwarves* and *War Of The Roses*. The first, from Zeal Game Studios, promises to be something like famously impenetrable roguelike city-building game *Dwarf Fortress*, but given an accessible 3D visualisation. *War Of The Roses*, meanwhile, has been pitched as a medieval *Battlefield*. It's a multiplayer melee combat game from Fatshark, the maker of firstperson shooter *Lead And Gold: Gangs Of The Wild West*. With oversight from *Battlefield* producer Gordon Van Dyke, it looks to use much of the structure of DICE's series, featuring cooperation between combat classes and a persistent character advancement system.

All these games show Paradox's penchant for quirky, mid-sized projects that would never survive focus groups. Indeed, there's no better illustration of its sensibilities than its reaction to EA's *Syndicate* reboot. Seeing fans outraged by the property's switch to FPS, Paradox announced *Cartel*, a spiritual sequel to the squad-based RTS. It's for this commitment to idiosyncrasy that Wester refers to the company as an 'independent publisher', a fittingly paradoxical term. Jorjani: "After *Magicka*, there was a noticeable shift in the types of pitches we got. Indie developers started to say, 'We never considered working with a publisher before, but we'll talk to you.' Half of the pitches we get now are from completely [unestablished] studios."

Although there's been a recent upswing in indie interest, Paradox has long had a role in nurturing fledgling Swedish studios. As Jorjani explains, "Paradox is one of the few actors in the Swedish games industry that does development, marketing, sales and distribution." Even *Minecraft* creator Mojang popped in for a few pointers when starting up. Now Paradox is looking for a way to formalise its role, introducing an incubation programme whereby indie startups are given office space, equipment and advice.

"We spend a significant amount of time on acquisitions, finding new projects," says Jorjani. "So we thought, 'Let's just take 25 per cent of that time we're spending and invest it in helping startups.' It's a way for us to find new projects. The game industry in Sweden employs only 12,000 people, but roughly 800 students graduate *every year* with a game degree in Sweden."

Wester cuts in: "Where does innovation in the games industry come from? Mostly from young teams who have nothing to lose. If you have something to lose, you go for the safe route every time. You'll drive safely, add a little for a sequel, then get a 30 per cent return on investment on a two-year capital binding. Everything's Excel based! Of course, we have our comfort zones as well. If you take *Europa Universalis*, we know how many games we're going to sell, we know what level of polish we need. So we can release a *Europa Universalis* game and know how much we're going to make. And we take some of that money and put it back into the fun factory, and give the rest to our – what are they called? – our indie Oompa Loompas, so they can innovate."

What Wester prizes most in his indie partners is focus. Paradox's games won't be able to compete with mega-budget titles on feature checklists, but if they can do one new, interesting thing then the game becomes a good bet.

"I'm very blunt," he says of his relationship with developers. "I want people to succeed. But if you come to me and say you have a game that's better than *World Of Warcraft*, I will tell you [that] you don't. You don't have the fanbase Blizzard has, you don't have the sheer amount of money, you don't have the experience. But what you might have is *this one thing*. And if you want to deliver that, and only that, we can work with you.

"There was a Swedish company, Star Vault, which went to some shitty stock exchange list saying, 'We're the next *WOW* and we're building it in Unreal Engine.' I knew it was going to be a failure. The expectations they put on everyone, the shareholders, the customers – it's bad for the whole industry. If I went out there and said we were the next Blizzard, investors would come rushing to us. But if I didn't deliver in two years, they'd be like, 'Wait a minute…' And that's a problem for the industry as a whole: people over-promise and under-deliver… But I understand that. People are passionate about what they do in this industry, and don't have business experience, so their projections are based on their passion."

Passion is clearly what Paradox relies on – the passion of developers who obsess about Stalingrad or the Dark Ages, the creators of innovative indie curios, and the eager startups. Helping them reach an audience who will share that passion is Paradox's challenge and, going by the company's figures so far, its good fortune. ■

Q&A

Johan Pilestedt
CEO, Arrowhead Studios

Emil Englund
Vice president, Arrowhead Studios





Paradox's principles are given credence by the success of *Magicka* – a game conceived by just eight students. Now it's being developed by a 21-strong team bearing the name of Arrowhead Studios, which is soon to release a third expansion, *The Other Side Of The Coin*, and is working on two other secret projects. But not all was rosy with *Magicka*'s development. The studio's **Johan Pilestedt** and **Emil Englund** discuss the rocky road to release.

***Magicka* launched in quite a state. Why didn't you delay the game?**
Johan Pilestedt I wish we had. The original plan of the game was a one-year project, and by the time it was released it had been delayed to a two-year project. And we'd made the most horrible mistake that you're able to make when you get more time – don't add more stuff, because the extra time is for finishing the original stuff. After the fourth time it slipped, Paradox said, "OK, this time we'll take whatever we get. Because if we don't, you'll never finish this game."

Sweden has a lively indie scene – is there something in its culture that encourages this?
JP I think it's the cold.
Emil Englund We have a lot of technical and creative schools as well as a really good social security network.
JP It's called the Centrala Studiestödsnämnden [The National Board of Student Aid]. Basically, they give you money to go to university, probably about 1,000 dollars a month to pay for rent and food. And that has funded so many indie projects, I can't even begin to tell you how many there are. I think Avalanche was founded on that principle. And Starbreeze. People sitting in their basement hacking away while they were supposed to go to university.

What happened with the rumoured Xbox version of *Magicka*?
JP Overestimating our own abilities, and also underestimating how difficult it is to make console products.

Is part of that communication with Microsoft?
EE Well, of course, it's such a huge machine. You have to be lucky to hit the right gear…
JP And also it's just a matter of sometimes doors open and sometimes don't. Every month they've got a new directive saying: 'The fantasy market's oversaturated; there will be no fantasy games on Xbox Live Arcade.'
EE 'Everything has to be Kinect or nothing.'
JP Then: 'Everybody needs at least one gimmick which enables your Windows phones to control the game.' When you're talking to Microsoft about getting games on to Xbox, it feels like they have a split personality. But it would be nice if [*Magicka*] ended up on consoles.





The view from Paradox's Stockholm office (above). It's high, but not quite high enough to survey the company's empire, which now spans 11 countries

THE MAKING OF…

Rock Band

When Activision bought Guitar Hero, Harmonix could have gone out quietly. Instead, it put on a bigger show than ever



The game's diverse set list was no accident. "We tried to decouple our personal taste from what we thought people would want to hear," project lead Greg LoPiccolo explains

Publisher MTV Games/EA
Developer Harmonix Music Systems
Format 360, PS3
Origin US
Release 2007 (US), 2008 (EU)

At the Loch Ness shop in Inverness, you'll find every kind of Nessie merchandise imaginable. What most tourists fail to notice about the assorted plastic keyrings, bath toys and fridge magnets is that very few of them are manufactured in Scotland. Instead, they're stamped: Made in China.

Thousands of kilometres away, factories located in Shenzhen and Dongguan in the Guangdong province churn out the souvenirs alongside toys and toasters. It's a hub of the plastic manufacturing industry, a place where you can have almost anything mass-produced to order.

The Haiyatt Garden Hotel is where American, Canadian and European product developers stay. There are buyers for Walmart, military contractors, and product managers stocking up for Christmas. There are even reps from the sex toy industry. But in 2007, an even stranger group arrived: a team from the Massachusetts-based Harmonix Music Systems. When business cards were swapped in the hotel bar, eyebrows were raised. What were guys from a software company doing in an an area known for plastics fabrication? It turned out they were putting together a band.

Eventually, Harmonix would employ 13,000 contract manufacturers and fill warehouses with mammoth boxes brimming with plastic instruments. Yet the manufacturing process was just the final stage of a long period of prototyping and development back in the US.

Those combined labours (more on them in a bit) resulted in *Rock Band*, released in November 2007 in the US and in 2008 elsewhere, which shook up musical simulators with a new level of interactivity and redefined the relationship of games with the music industry.

You can't tell the story of *Rock Band* without mentioning *Guitar Hero*, though. Built by Harmonix and indie peripherals developer RedOctane, the shredding sim proved a surprise hit upon its 2005 release. But success brought changes, and Activision bought RedOctane for $100 million in 2006. Harmonix didn't own the *Guitar Hero* IP, and so found itself cut loose.

While Activision built up the *Guitar Hero* franchise, Harmonix took the less obvious path. It wanted to create a co-op band simulator that was also a digital music distribution platform. Just as MTV had redefined the way music was listened to in the '80s, Harmonix set out to challenge the passive consumption of music with *Rock Band*.



Harmonix CEO Alex Rigopulos (left) and hardware director Daniel Sussman helped millions unleash their inner rock gods

Batting away offers from traditional game publishers, Harmonix partnered with MTV/ Viacom. "MTV were very supportive of what we were doing as a music entertainment endeavour and not just as a videogame endeavour," explains Harmonix CEO and co-founder **Alex Rigopulos**. With MTV behind it, *Rock Band* took its first step towards becoming a music platform with a library of songs and a lucrative set of track-based DLC.

"We thought of ourselves as the curators of rock for a casual audience that wasn't as familiar with rock and roll or as committed to it as a lifestyle as the people at Harmonix are," says project lead **Greg LoPiccolo**, who is also the former bassist for the Boston band Tribe. "We tried very hard to cover every genre and have representative examples, so that if you played *Rock Band* you could explore the history of rock from its origins to the present within the game."

"The recorded music industry as a whole viewed games as this kind of fringe thing that wasn't relevant"

At the time, *Guitar Hero* licensed its compositions and used studio covers for its soundtrack. *Rock Band* was the first game to request the original multitrack master recordings of songs. "It completely changed the dialogue with the music industry, including the recording artists," says Rigopulos, who credits MTV's clout as a partner in getting the company's requests heard. "Prior to *Rock Band*, recording artists basically wouldn't even return our calls. Generally speaking, the recorded music industry as a whole viewed videogames as this kind of fringe thing that wasn't really relevant."

"We put a lot of effort into showing the artists we weren't trying to rip them off or do ringtones," LoPiccolo says. "Part of our pitch was: if you let people play your song in this game, they will develop a deeper understanding of your song's craft. People listening to music don't think about things like basslines or drum parts, but if you play a bassline or drum part in *Rock Band* you get a much greater understanding of the creativity and the craft and the performance that went into it."

Harmonix had soon caught the music industry's imagination. Now all it had to do was build the game to fulfil the promise.

Being in a chart-topping band is about more than music, it's about attitude, energy and a sense of fortuitous chaos. It was a feeling the staff at Harmonix's office in Cambridge, Massachusetts, found enveloping them in 2006, as the company scaled up from 90 to 300 staff in just 24 months.

"It was an insane period," Rigopulos recalls. "We actually burst out of our offices right in beta for *Rock Band*. That's how bad it got. We literally had people sitting in the hallways with their laptops resting on skateboards on their laps doing software development, because there weren't any desks for them to sit at."

Thanks to the game's huge scope, the new hires were essential. Rigopulos: "We'd built *Guitar Hero* on a shoestring budget in a very short period of time. In *Rock Band*, we had to build a complete guitar game and a complete drumming game from scratch, and a complete singing game – plus a layer of band gameplay that unified them all together, along with the digital distribution platform for digital music, and a character creation system. All of this in one package."

Underpinning that package was the music. The *Rock Band* disc would include 58 tracks – including such hits as Suffragette City by David Bowie and Reptilia by The Strokes – with the ambitious promise of weekly DLC to come.

But converting master recordings into playable levels was a complex process that challenged even Harmonix's crack staff of musicians-turned-developers. First, the raw 16-, 24- or 48-channel multitrack sessions had to be collapsed down into sections that were a good representation of the drums, bass, vocals and guitar parts. Then each part needed to be represented as 'gems' on an onscreen timeline, with various configurations for different difficulty levels, and all while retaining the musicality in the original performance.

"Even for a guitar, that can be kind of a challenge," LoPiccolo says. "Any given multitrack song could have a multiplicity of rhythm parts and lead parts. The stems mixing had to take all of that into account, so you'd have a simplified, accessible and – musically and gameplay-wise – interesting part to play along with. Plus, music is full of ambiguity, particularly rock music. It took a lot of trial and error, and a lot of effort, and

craft for us to figure out how to consistently represent this big, blurry audio mess."

Harmonix had experience working with guitars before, of course, and had dabbled with microphones for *Karaoke Revolution*. Drum kits were new, though. Starting with a hacked Roland electronic drum kit plugged into a console, the team experimented with how the drums would work, from onscreen timelines through to the kick pedal. It took around seven months to get right.

And if the level creation involved breaking down the layered tracks of a given song into their simplest parts, gameplay went in the opposite direction, with cohesion key to *Rock Band*'s multiplayer experience. "The first versions of the multiplayer game were pretty terrible," LoPiccolo laughs. "It was essentially four singleplayer games glued together. You weren't really aware of the players around you, and you didn't really care about them. We had to find a mechanic to make people depend on each other."

The design team pushed several factors to promote player investment, including the sheer extent of customisable options within the character creation mode and the career path. But most important of all were gameplay mechanics such as back from the brink (where one player can 'save' a downed comrade) or big rock endings (where everyone gets to shred like crazy).

In the midst of development, the first instrument prototypes arrived. "We had this great moment when the lead engineer showed up in our Cambridge office with the first working sample," recalls then-director of hardware development **Daniel Sussman**. "He handed it to Alex and then watched in horror as Alex started strumming like a maniac and whipping the thing around by its headstock." The hardware was going to have to be toughened up to survive players rocking out.

Nobody who worked at Harmonix ever expected to end up in China, but then nobody at Harmonix had ever expected to be creating peripherals. "We had never developed a single piece of hardware before in our lives; we were a software company," Rigopulos explains. "To go from never having developed hardware to a year later shipping millions of units of several – *several* – custom peripherals into the marketplace simultaneously was just a madhouse. A lot of us felt as though we aged five years in 18 months."

Still wincing at Rigopulos's gleeful trashing of the first guitar prototype, Sussman and his team flew out to China to oversee the manufacturing and ensure that every instrument to be included in the game was tested to death. Controllers were subjected to ovens, freezers and humidifiers, and then checked for functionality. Everything was systematically punished.

Q&A



Greg LoPiccolo
Project lead for *Rock Band*, Harmonix Music Systems

How difficult was it to secure the multitrack masters of songs?
What we discovered was that nobody on the label or publishing side or even the artists' side had ever fielded such requests. Nobody had ever asked for multitrack masters before, because no one had ever thought of a reason to use them. There were a lot of songs – including some gigantic, iconic songs – for which the multitrack masters could not be located. There are little gaps in the *Rock Band* library and in many cases it's because the multitracks don't exist any more – they got lost.

Which tracks were the hardest to turn into 'levels' for the game?
When we were doing the DLC, we got a whole slug of Grateful Dead tracks. They gave people at Harmonix fits, because the time wandered to some degree – it was well before the advent of click tracks... A lot of it wasn't really very regimented, it was just through-composed, so it was like blizzards of notes. I remember that being an enormous amount of work to transcribe.

How much artistry is involved in the process?
One of the things that's probably not apparent to the casual consumer of our games – but that internally we're incredibly proud of – is that we have a lot of seasoned musicians at Harmonix. They put an enormous amount of work and creativity into accurate representations of all these tracks. They really try to capture the essence of the song.

"We had machines that would whack drum heads repeatedly at variable (and fixed) force for days on end," Rigopulos says. "The same for fret buttons, strum bars... all the components that a player would handle. We also did drop tests where test engineers would hold the controllers at specific heights and then drop them to see what, if anything, broke. It was wicked loud."

Rigorous? Yes. Sufficient? Not quite. After the game shipped, some guitars developed faults, meaning a slew of warranty returns. "I don't think we made poor calls about feature set or design," Sussman says. "Most of the quality issues we saw were a result of immaturity on the planning and logistics side. There is also the reality of watching first-generation products hit a huge market – no engineer can account for the ways in which real players will handle their goods."

If the peripheral side of development was tricky, the last few weeks of making the software mirrored the game's chaotic big rock endings as the team battled bugs before the game's gold master build. Co-publisher EA said that it had never seen so many bugs so close to shipping.

Compounding the anxiety was the knowledge that Harmonix was going head to head with rival Activision, which had *Guitar Hero 3: Legends Of Rock* scheduled for an October release. It was shaping up to be a brutal battle of the bands as acrimonious as Blur vs Oasis.

"Activision is a giant publisher with *World Of Warcraft*, *Call Of Duty* and other sources of income," Rigopulos notes. "*Rock Band* was our only franchise. If it had failed, it would have posed an existential threat to us as a company."

Thankfully for Harmonix, the game's launch was a phenomenon. Tens of millions, including many who wouldn't identify themselves as gamers, were picking up the plastic instruments and playing. From the music industry's perspective, *Rock Band* was both a promotional tool and distribution network. Its weekly DLC offered record labels a fresh revenue stream while breathing life into old acts and showcasing new ones. Despite some carping over 'paltry' licensing fees, *Rock Band* cemented the feeling that partnering with the videogame sector could be extremely lucrative.

"Hopefully, it helps evolve music to not just a linear art form but a more interactive art form," MTV Networks boss **Van Toffler** said back in 2008. "You look at a lot of 20-year-olds who are reticent to plop down $20 for a CD, yet they don't mind paying $25 for a DVD or $50 for a videogame... We're seeing the audience really embrace hearing new music for the first time or engaging with classic rock songs in a new way."

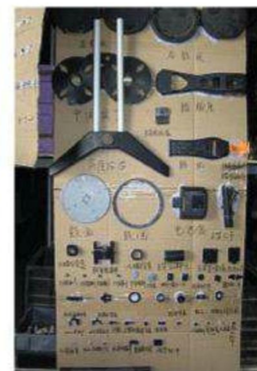
Yes, people engaged in their millions, but the genre soon became an arms race between the *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* camps. "Both of us went into that competition with the mindset that there was really only space for one [franchise]," Rigopulos says, "and therefore we were both aggressive in our approach in a way that didn't ultimately serve either of us well."

Competing for the same retail space meant both companies ended up overspending on marketing and music licensing fees as they competed for common resources. Meanwhile, stockpiled inventory – later sold at slashed prices – also hurt them and helped bring the music simulation boom to an abrupt end.

Consumers' fascination with the genre may now have nose-dived, but Harmonix hasn't given up on the genre. Its *Dance Central* IP has proven that the licensed music DLC business model still has legs – and it's not done with *Rock Band* just yet. "Without being very specific, there's a lot of stuff we're working on that will change the way people think about *Rock Band*," LoPiccolo promises. The beat, it seems, will go on. ■





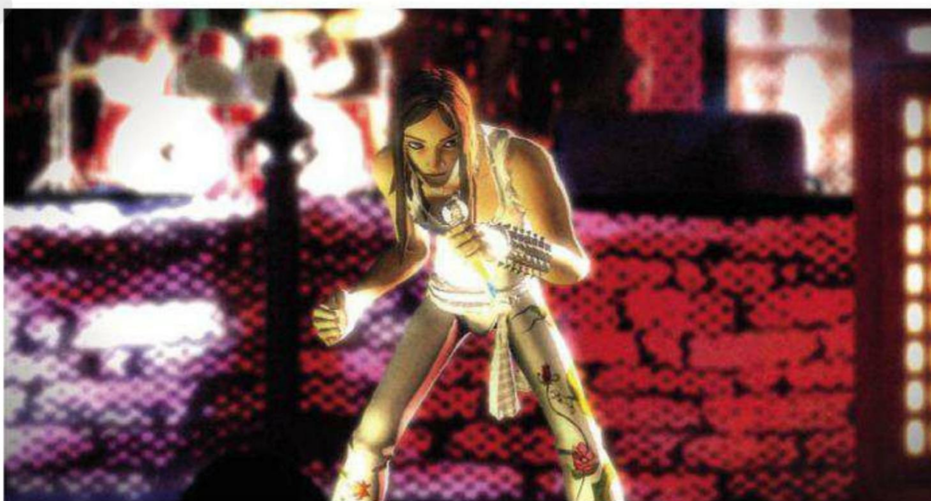


A tester in a Chinese factory perfects his snare technique (centre). Other tests involved dropping the drum kit from waist height

Fountains of wane

Guitar Hero's incredible success paved the way for a boom in music simulation games that *Rock Band* helped to take to the next level, but the genre lost its sheen seemingly overnight. What happened? "Everyone likes nice clean and tidy explanations for things," Rigopulos says. "You often hear people saying Activision killed the category by over-saturating it with too many releases. Maybe that's part of the story, but I certainly don't think that's the entire story."

Harmonix's co-founder points to the recession's impact and the lack of evolution in the genre's core gameplay. But he also flags up the fickle nature of consumers, especially the non-core, casual gamers who drove a lot of the genre's huge sales. "Those mainstream consumers are easily attracted to other things. When a new game experience came along, like the emerging entertainment experience in the mobile space, they're easily lured away to the next bubble."



Rock Band's multiplayer UI (main) may look busy, but it works brilliantly to help you revive any bandmates that run into trouble

What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

Gaming's creative constants

Movies and television are, in a sense, just conventions. Expectations of what they're supposed to be about as media may have built up like calcium deposits over decades, but they aren't immutable. Arguably, they may die, or reduce, and be replaced by something else, but it's hard to see how. Many gamers find the idea that PC or console gaming may die to be inconceivable.

And yet conventions come and go. Around 150 years ago, people read serialised novels or considered written poetry important, but where are these media now? In five, ten or 20 years' time, we may look back on console gaming as a phase before, say, Nintendo developed those always-on stereoscopic holo-glasses that blew our minds. Who knows what form the future will take?

However, although the form of video content may change, the basic rules of story remain. Empathising with heroes, following plot threads and so on doesn't vary, and hasn't done since Chaucer. The same is true for play. Games will still be games regardless of form, because there are deeper rules than convention, rules that bind games together and make them tick.

I call them 'creative constants'. Much like physical and mathematical constants, creative constants are always present, shaping everything. They are biological, psychological, social and economic boundaries that dictate what the audience can understand and enjoy, and a game that ignores them is not avant-garde, just bad.

Creative constants are the greatest tool that a game designer has. If you understand them, then you can design for them, figure out how to take advantage of them, and also how to create meaning and art within games. They apply whether the game is an adventure or a shooter, a simulation of a planet or a small card game.

The first constant is fun. Fun is the joy of winning while mastering fair game dynamics. It's learning, achieving and building on early successes; figuring out how a game ticks; and what the optimal strategy might be. Fun is why games are fascinating, and the primary reason why your play brain wants to play. It is also why you often stop playing games long before their stories are finished, even though they may have interesting plots or themes. When a game is no longer fun, it quickly becomes repetitive work, and the play brain hates work.



A game where every health pack is unique and every enemy has its own personality is a bad game

The second constant is lensing. According to psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the human mind can only process about 110 bits of information per second. Players do not have unlimited attention span, and so economy of information matters, as does predictable behaviour. A game where every health pack is unique and every enemy has its own personality is a bad game. The game designer also needs to understand that the brain will focus on the urgent rather than the metaphorical in times of pressure.

The third constant is physicality. The player needs to be able to establish a seamless connection with a game in order to get immersed, and that means its controls must behave in a natural fashion. Games need to pay attention to feel and fluidity. Cause and effect need to be tangible. If I push a button, something obvious should happen. It needs to be clear that actions cause change in the game, just as they would in the real world, and that the change feels natural.

The fourth constant is time: real time and game time. The availability of time is why some players never get into certain games, while others devote their lives to squeezing every last drop of fun out of them. Time is also why asynchronous games (such as singleplayer or quest-oriented MMOs) tend to attract far larger audiences than synchronous games (such as multiplayer or turn-based games) over the longterm. Asynchronous games are better suited to the schedules of players' lives, because they aren't dependent on other players making the time to play with you.

The fifth constant is self. When a player takes on a role in a game, they do not become it. They always remain themselves, but the gameworld allows certain parts of their personality to be magnified. Players aren't actors delivering a performance; they are more like normally civil people who swear and honk their horns at others when they drive. Just as the world of roads turns some otherwise-lovely people into lunatics, who players are, what fantasies appeal, and how they behave may change in a game. But it all comes from within, rather than as a part of roleplaying.

The final constant is profit: a game has to turn one in order to prosper. However, the manner in which it does so matters hugely to its culture. *Minecraft* must profit every bit as much as a casino, but the culture of the two is totally different. Profit changes how players see the game and whether they regard its maker as a builder of communities or a strip miner. For game makers, players are either potential relationships to be fostered or assets to be harvested, and whichever way you approach that will fundamentally change the kind of game you can make. You may want to tell a great story, but if your profit model is that of the slot machine then it's just not going to work.

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him at www.whatgamesare.com

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In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

A taxonomy of player skills

Respawn. Your team is across the map, fighting for every inch, and you're sprinting to get there before time runs out. Approaching the contested area, you hear intermittent explosions, the sound of automatic weapons, and the occasional clap of sniper fire. A steady stream of kill indicators tells you things should be even up ahead. Reinforcements are close behind. Rounding the final corner into the battle zone, you desperately rush for cover, but the instant before you get into the fight, you catch a single-frame glimpse of a hand grenade flying directly at your head. Respawn.

"Lucky bastard," you curse.

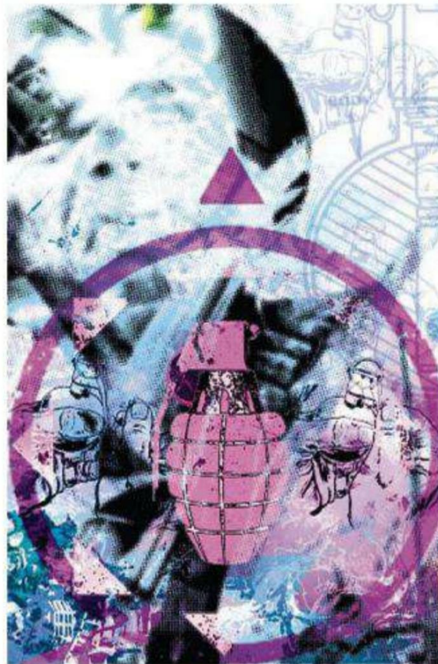
But was it luck that got you killed? Maybe. You can certainly attribute death by randomly flung grenade to luck. But if you want to become a better player or game designer, you need to ask yourself how much of it was luck, how much of it was skill and, most importantly, what specific skills were leveraged in your killing. A thorough understanding of the skills required to achieve any intentional effect is central to becoming a better designer – or to improving your K/D ratio.

It's beyond the scope of this column to attempt to form a complete taxonomy of player skills, but I'd like to make a quick summary of nine skills that I think are fundamental to videogames.

Precision and accuracy are two different yet closely related skills. Accuracy is how close you can get to what you're trying to hit, while precision is how reproducibly you can hit the same spot. We normally think of these as being the reflex skills of firing rounds on-target in an FPS, but precision and accuracy skills also apply to being able to hit the perfect line through a hairpin turn lap after lap in a racing game.

Timing is exactly what it seems: the ability to perform an action – any action – at the right time. Timing is very often multiplied by precision and/or accuracy: the ability to hit the perfect line on our hairpin turn needs to be activated at the right moment. Starting the turn a microsecond too early or late puts a ceiling on the results of an otherwise perfectly accurate and precise input.

Minimaxing (or maximining) is the skill of minimising your maximum loss – sometimes called your 'exposure' – and/or maximising



A thorough understanding of the skills required to achieve any intentional effect is central to becoming a better designer

your minimum gain, and it's rooted in mathematical game theory. In purely numerical games, a human being can never outperform a computer at this. But minimaxing can also be thought of as the skill of knowing where to fight. If you've ever spelled 'xi' to gain a triple word score instead of spelling 'exiles' for a measly 13 points, then you have exercised your minimax skill.

Observation is the ability to track information within a sensory environment that obfuscates it. Hidden-object games obviously leverage the observational skills of the player, but there are many examples. Stealth games often challenge you to not only observe the presence of an object, such as a guard on a balcony, but also to observe the state of the object. Perhaps you may discern the guard's snoring over the buzz of the air conditioning, informing you that he's asleep and won't see you, but may hear you if you're loud.

Deduction and induction are the skills of 'figuring out'. You can deduce how to craft a diamond sword in *Minecraft* by making a best guess, plugging some resources into the crafting table and iterating. Or you can induce how one is crafted by observing how you craft wood, stone, iron, and diamond tools, then test the theory that the same progression should apply to swords. Either way, the better skill to have is that of looking on the Internet for the answer, which hopefully illuminates our collective failure to design games that challenge these two engaging skills.

Patience is also a skill. Many gamers and designers will immediately dismiss designs that require it as asking players to confront boredom, but most competitive games tax this skill heavily. You need patience to not attack the enemy base too soon in an RTS, to unleash your special attack at the right time, or to wait for an opponent to leave an opening in a fighting game.

Multitasking is the skill of being able to perform multiple parallel actions using two or more of the other skills at the same time. For example, sneaking past a patrolling guard requires observation and timing, and picking a lock requires precision and accuracy, but picking the lock while avoiding the guard who's patrolling the hallway requires the skill of multitasking both sets of skills, since your attention is divided between two separate tasks.

All things considered, that grenade in the face maybe doesn't seem so much like luck any more, does it? I hope not. A player on the other team was minimaxing his health and damage capacity. He induced that your chosen cover point was a likely place to connect with a target. He timed his health depletion against his grenade inventory depletion, and had the patience to bide his time. He made a precise and accurate throw to the cover you were running for, and was lucky enough that you happened to be running there when the grenade exploded. How much was luck? How much was skill? You should know.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com

The Possibility Space



RANDY SMITH

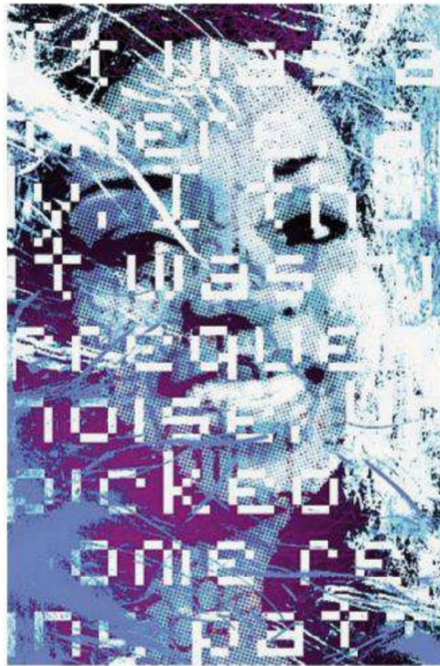
When quests and story collide

There are a few common techniques for integrating story moments into gameplay quests. The first is to carefully craft the game as a linear experience and enforce the ordering of quests. This allows game designers to determine what has previously happened at a glance, and therefore what each character would think and say now. So the player must first recover the wizard's staff, say, and is then sent to the village with it, having been told that it is the legendary artefact the mayor awaits.

Technique two is to offer up an open world where players can encounter quests in any order, but to make them so distant in space, time and topic that there's no reason the characters involved in one should comment on the status of another. The mayor is glad the player killed the cave monster. The wizard thanks them for returning his staff. Neither has ever heard of the other.

When either technique proves fallible, you'll wind up with characters in proximity to events whose status depends on the player's prior actions. The mayor is awaiting the wizard's staff, but it's possible to arrive at the village early without it. The band-aid technique is to write generic dialogue that works in any situation. "Poor us, we are waiting for the hero who bears the artefact," the mayor bleats, and this, depending on context, may be followed by: "My goodness, you have the artefact!" This technique is strained as interconnectedness and uncertainty increase. What if the staff is only half of the artefact – shouldn't the mayor comment on that? What if one half is owned by his evil twin, who players either have or haven't killed to recover it? Wouldn't the mayor have feelings about each possibility? In interconnected, flexible storylines, the more that ambiguous dialogue is applied, the more it saps sentences of power and characters of credibility.

The obvious complaint about the first technique is that every player is having the same experience and their gameplay can never impact the story. But done right this feels refreshingly honest about the limitations of the work. In many games you are either watching dialogue in a cutscene or playing an action sequence, and the message is clear: this experience is the same for everyone. The complaint about the second technique is that



The more that ambiguous dialogue is applied, the more it saps sentences of power and characters of credibility

deliberately severing connections leads to stories that feel anonymous and weightless. What's meaningful about a world where no one has heard of anything or is impacted by anyone else?

In light of all this, the ambition of *Waking Mars* is to deliver highly aware characters in an open-ended world where quests have lots of fictional interconnectedness. Amani thinks you should investigate the mysterious signal, but your character, Liang, is skeptical, so you get to decide. If you do investigate, then when you later arrive at a suspiciously regular, probably not naturally occurring structure, Liang and Amani draw a connection between the signal and the structure. Optionally, if you haven't yet interpreted the signal when you get to this structure, Amani refers back to your disagreement and her belief that the signal must be important. This then adds another branch: if you visit the signal afterwards, Amani is pleased you've finally taken her advice. These conversations branch on the player's decisions and also on which conversations have previously played – whatever it takes to keep the narrative credible, lucid and specific. One reason we're able to do this is because our conversations are text, which is cheaper and more flexible than storytelling through voice recording and 3D faces.

How well does it work? Well, here's an interesting question: how would players even know this is happening? On one hand, our characters might exhibit some awareness about how the player is driving the narrative. On the other, when this happens in a linear game, it feels much the same way. The dialogue was a great match for the experience you just had, because there was no other experience you could have had. The trick is in elegantly covering up the rails so that the player never notices the lack of flexibility. The trick to our technique is brute force coverage over (we hope) every possibility. When both are done perfectly, you can't tell the difference, at least not in a single playthrough. So for all I know, this seamless support for branching happens all over the place in games and I just haven't noticed, instead presuming the quests were less interconnected than they really are.

Regardless, players whose tastes lean heavily toward gameplay over story will skip their way through our dialogue like any other. And, for them, rightly so, because games are an interactive medium, and branching dialogue is a shallow interaction that's capable of supporting, not replacing, systemic gameplay. So is this branching technique worth it? Well, it's good design to offer open-ended experiences and detect and respond to player choices, so the other techniques both seem like cop-outs. When the branching technique works, it produces what I call a 'cosier fit', feeling natural without those weird, janky gaps that often make games seem only partially aware of themselves. Assuming you're working within its limitations, I would say yes.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose second game, Waking Mars *is available in the App Store now*

Word Play



JAMES LEACH

Brevity

Mark Twain apparently once said: "I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead." This annoyingly clever utterance has a ring of truth to it; writers do clamour for as much space as they can get. Not always so they can do more, but because they don't have to do it quite as well.

When you're at school, writing essays is a bit of a chore. If you're asked to do 800 words on the English Civil War, you'll probably grind them out painfully, desperate to get to the total so that you can stop and fire up *Jetpac* on your Spectrum. At least, that's my recollection, although I suspect the youth of today play other games. But that attitude changes as soon as you start writing about what you want to write about, or writing for a living (these two are rarely the same). Suddenly, you want all the space you can get. The more you have, the more you can do with it. The better job you can make. Longer and more is better.

Longer and more isn't better, it's just easier. In the writing world, like the real world, nothing should be wasted. Conciseness and brevity are paramount. They indicate the mark of a true craftsperson, and a talented, conscientious writer. Did I need to write both conciseness and brevity? Ah well, leave it. After all, I've got 900 words.

In games too, of course, writers crave high word counts and multi-line dialogue. We argue, forcefully, that we can do more with it – get more story across and foster more emotion. We can add depth, structure and value. And, yes, if we're not wasting the space we have, this is true. Screenwriters Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio – the guys who did Shrek, Pirates Of The Caribbean and all that – spend a lot of time explaining to would-be movie writers exactly how to format and reduce the size of the text on manuscripts in order to steal a few extra lines without going over the page counts they're adhering to. The pair fully acknowledge that the more writers are able to shoehorn in, the better.

Games are to be played, though, not watched and listened to. If there's a story going on, you want to pick up your controller (or wave your hands about) and form it, rather than be told. You, the player, don't want cutscenes, back and forth, briefings and plot. You want to get out there and start shooting, jumping, or whatever. So, quite correctly, developers want to minimise the writing required. In player experience terms, they want to minimise the amount of text onscreen, the amount of time the player spends not playing, and the amount of nonessential information the player needs in his or her head. This also minimises the amount of money that needs to be spent on hiring recording studios with Stephen Fry in them, plus it reduces the amount of headachy, costly translation required, and the time spent dealing with that awkward woman at head office who enjoys making localisation such a pain in the arse.



Great writing isn't about sounding like us – it's about getting under our skin, making us feel stuff, and moving us

So we agree that succinct is good in games. If you encounter writers who don't, they're trying to get more money out of you. How do you achieve succinctness, though? Two things are important. First, every line has to matter. Each one must advance the story and provide the information or produce the emotion you're aiming for. Although in real life nearly everything we say is fluff and nonsense, that sort of realism has no place in games and films, and rarely in books. Since characters started looking and sounding good in games, and since actors in sound booths started to take recording them seriously, there have been many examples of dialogue and plotting in games that sound like real life. Writers – and I may have been one in the past – have deliberately gone down this path, and it's almost always a mistake. Great writing (and acting) isn't about sounding like us – it's about getting under our skin, making us feel stuff, and moving us. It's a concentration, an essence. And in order to be concentrated and essential, it has to be pared down and stripped to its barest form. Don't believe me? Watch any decent film. What sounds like conversation is actually a rapidly moving and meaningful series of utterances with nothing wasted. It feels real because it's done well, we understand it and care.

Games can take this even further. Players are listening passively, so get the people to say what they need to and get them off the screen. Gamers remember characters and objects far more than they remember stories, so play to that. Having characters say less doesn't make them less characterful. In fact, it's the opposite: when they do speak, it's more impactful. Think Rutger Hauer vs Woody Allen. Which is better suited to being a game character? Precisely.

Surely, though, the bigger the game, the more complex the plot and the more there is to say? Sometimes, yes, and many games do benefit from having a rich cast of verbose, world-filling chatterboxes. But the important stuff should be brief, and edited to an inch of its life, and then cut and edited again until all that's left is perfection.

I could have saved a ton of words by simply saying, 'In games writing, less is more.' Ah well, at least I filled the page.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online

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